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# BY DEVIOUS WAYS



CHARLES GARVICE

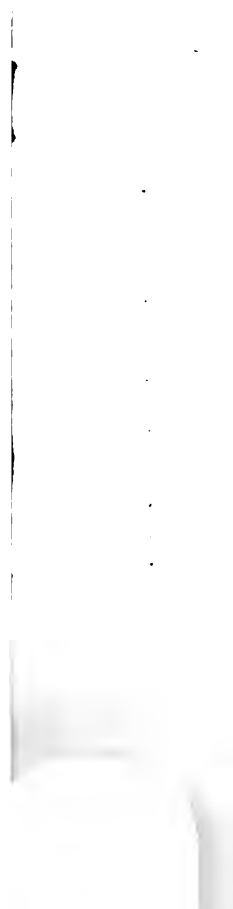


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**BY DEVIOUS WAYS.**



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By CHARLES GARVICE

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## BY DEVIOUS WAYS.

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### CHAPTER I.

IN a silence and a solitude indescribable, a young girl stood on a narrow path which almost hung over a wide-stretching lake. Below her, the water lay like a huge opal; at one moment it was of a vivid green, at the next it glittered redly in the rays of the setting sun, until presently the shadows of the cloud-capped mountains cast a purple mantle over the glorious surface. Behind the girl rose a wooded hill. It was of perfect emerald; so also were the islands which dotted the lake, like gems in a setting of gems. The scene was one of exquisite beauty, and, without a doubt, the reader will at once jump to the conclusion that he is going to be carried to a lake in Switzerland or Italy. But this spot of marvellous beauty is no farther off than Ireland.

What the majority of people don't know about Ireland would fill a volume of considerable size. It is spoken of as the "Emerald Isle," and most persons have a vague notion that it is "pretty;" but few have any idea that for colour it can compete with Italy, and, for grandeur, with its neighbour, Scotland.

This lake, which is called Marishannon, is quite out of the beaten track; it is thirty miles from anywhere; scarcely one of its few inhabitants have ever seen a railway; it is almost inaccessible, because the road to the nearest town is bad, and winds over a hill so high and so rugged that even the modern traveller is daunted at sight of it.

There is no coach to Marishannon, and the only conveyance which works between it and Barrigfyne, the nearest town, is a carrier's cart, which consumes the whole day and part of a night in the journey.

Just behind the bend of the hill on which the girl stood, nestled one of those old barrack-like mansions which the Irish gentry are so proud and fond of; below that again were the

Warner had got leave, and had been suddenly seized by a desire to "see something of Ireland." He had met his companion the night before at a wayside inn. Warner had scowled at him, in the beautiful way which makes Englishmen so beloved wherever they go; and if the other man had been of Warner's type, the two men would probably have spent the evening without saying a word, and have gone their respective ways still strangers; but Spencer Foyle made it a rule never to meet a man without attempting to know something of him, and had lured the surly Warner into conversation.

They dined together, and afterwards played a game of écarté with a greasy pack of cards—Spencer Foyle, who was a master of the game, permitting Warner to win; and they had agreed to tramp on together for, at any rate, the next few days.

During the evening Spencer Foyle had managed to learn everything there was to learn about his companion, whereas, all Captain Warner learnt about Spencer Foyle was his name, and the rather limited fact that Foyle was "travelling for his health."

As they came to the bend of the road, Warner pulled up, wiped his forehead, and swore.

"I wonder where the devil we are!" he said, with the drawl which men of his class and character consider the correct thing.

"I don't know," said Spencer Foyle. "Does it matter?"

His voice was low and soft, but there was a touch of cynical contempt and mistrust which gave it an unpleasant effect. He could conceal his cynicism when it suited him, but just now, and with such a man as Warner, concealment was scarcely worth the trouble.

"Why, dash it!" said Warner, "it's getting lateish; it will be night before long. Where are we going to put up? I'd give something for a whisky and soda, too. Beastly wild, out-of-the-way place. I wonder why the devil I came here!"

Spencer Foyle leant his arms upon a piece of broken fence, and looked down at the lake and the opposite hills.

"It's beautiful enough, in all conscience," he said; "but not a soul or a house in sight, as you say. If this place were stuck in the middle of Switzerland, or at the other end of the world, English people would crowd to it, and stifle to death in flea-bitten hotels. But, because it is in Ireland, nothing will induce them to come here, though it lies at their door."

Warner grunted.

"Why don't they build a parade, and stick up some hotels, and some decent tennis-courts, and have a band, and all that sort of thing? Who the deuce is coming here without something to do?"

"Just so," said Foyle. "Yet the English are always raving about beauty, their love of scenery and Nature!"

"Nature's rot!" remarked Warner, with another grunt.

"Yes?" said Spencer Foyle, languidly, and with a faint sneer, which, faint as it was, transformed his face unpleasantly. "But, what a country this is!" he continued, talking more to himself than to his foolish companion. "Ireland should be called the Land of Surprises. It's a surprise from the moment you come ashore. I've been here three weeks, and pretty nearly every minute of the time I've wanted to kick the people who write Irish novels and Irish plays. I wonder if there ever was an Irishman who wore a green-tailed coat, a tall felt hat without a brim, and with a pipe stuck in the band? I've not seen a single specimen. And, as to the language—the Irishman who says 'Shure!' and 'Bedad!' and 'Faith!' and all the rest of it, exists only in the idiotic brain of the novel-writer and the play-monger."

Warner yawned heavily, as if the speculation didn't interest him in the very least.

"Beastly country!" he said. "Got a cigarette?"

Foyle tossed him a silver cigarette-case.

"We'd better go on," he said. "We shall find an inn of some kind somewhere presently."

"I hope so," said Warner, querulously. "If we hadn't taken the turning you'd insisted upon, we should have got to some decent town before this."

"Yes; it was my fault," said Spencer Foyle, calmly, not to say contemptuously. "Anyhow, the place is not uninhabited—Ah! what a pretty girl!" he broke off, with a side-long glance at Nora.

Warner stared at her boldly.

"Jove! you're right," he said. "Here, I'll ask her where we are."

Something in his tone, that air of conceit and satisfaction which distinguishes the unfortunate idiot who fancies himself a lady-killer, caused Foyle to say, warningly, and under his breath:

"Take care, Warner. There is one thing they say about Ireland which is true—her daughters possess that rare quality, self-respect."

Warner laughed, the self-assured laugh of the man who is



convinced that no woman, especially one of the lower class, can resist his fascinations.

"Bosh! my dear fellow," he said; "all girls are alike wherever you find them."

Spencer Foyle shrugged his shoulders.

"Very well," he said. "But don't be surprised if, when you attempt to chaff her, a big brother or sweetheart comes out with a shillelagh—not that I have yet seen that historic weapon."

"All bosh!" remarked Warner again. "I can take care of myself."

Spencer Foyle shrugged his shoulders again; and Warner, with his cigarette stuck in the corner of his lips, sauntered up to Nora, and, barely raising his hat, said, with a pronounced drawl, and the smile which fitly accompanies it:

"Good evening. Will you tell us where we are?"

The girl raised her splendid eyes, looked at him, through him, and up the road again, as if some troublesome gnat had buzzed in front of her face.

"You are in Marishannon," she said, and her tones rang soft and low, like a clear strain of music, after the horrible drawl which had called them forth.

Spencer Foyle looked at her with a keen dart of his dark eyes, but he said nothing.

"Thanks!" drawled Warner. "Awfully good of you; but that doesn't convey much information. We don't know Mari—whatever it is. We are strangers, don't you know, and we're looking out for an inn."

"There is no inn in Marishannon," she said, still looking beyond him.

"Oh, come, don't you know, there must be some place where we can put up," said Warner, with an insinuating smile.

As this was not a question, the girl remained silent. Spencer Foyle came a step forward, and raised his hat.

"Pardon me," he said, as deferentially as if he were addressing a lady, but with a peculiar kind of cynical contempt which, perhaps, the girl noticed; for, as she turned her eyes upon him, the dark lashes quivered, and the delicately-formed lips grew set—"pardon me, but can you tell us how far we are from the next inn?"

"There's an inn at Lenny," she said.

"Oh, dash it! that's the place we came from," struck in Warner. "We can't go back all that deuce of a way. Isn't there any place here where we can get some whisky? Come,

there must be; everybody brews it on the sly, don't they? We're awfully thirsty—just dying for a drink.”

The girl raised her hand.

“There’s the stream, and there’s the lake,” she said, pointing to both, and with a gravity which would have done credit to a duchess.

Warner stared; then burst into a laugh.

“That’s awfully good!” he drawled. “’Pon my soul, that’s smart—eh, Foyle? But that kind of liquor is not much in our way. Look here, perhaps this will unlock those pretty lips of yours.”

He took half a crown from his pocket and held it out to her.

Foyle made half a motion as if to arrest the impertinence; then let his hand drop, and looked from one to the other with a faint smile of cynical amusement.

The girl’s face flamed for a moment; then it resumed its usual color. She took the coin, and, raising her hand, threw it, with all the coolness of a boy, into the lake beneath, and turned, without a word, or even a gesture.

Spencer Foyle smiled, and looked at his discomfited companion with a languid expression of triumph.

A sensible man would have accepted the rebuff in all humility, and felt heartily ashamed of himself. But this fatuous fool reddened like an overgrown schoolboy, and, with an oath, exclaimed, angrily:

“Confound her impudence! She’s not going to get off like that!” and he opened the gate, and followed her.

She was walking slowly down the narrow path; but she stopped as she heard his footsteps, and, turning her head, looked over her shoulder at him.

“Here,” said Warner. “That’s not fair, you know! This is a pretty way to treat a fellow!”

She said not a word.

“You took my half-crown, you know. I must have something for it.”

He was close beside her as he spoke. But she did not move, did not shrink back, nor quail in the slightest—simply stood and looked at him with eyes which made Captain Warner more uncomfortable than he had ever been before in his life. Had he been alone with her he would have beaten a retreat; but there was Spencer Foyle; and he could feel that gentleman’s cynical smile scorch into his back. He felt he must do something to maintain his reputation.

“If you won’t give me any information for my half-

crown," he said, "I must have something else. Can't waste money in these hard times, my girl! Give me a kiss, and we'll cry quits."

He put out his hand as he spoke, with the insolent idea of seizing her by the arm; but, before he could touch her, she had sprung from his side, and, with the quickness and sureness of a goat, had leapt across a narrow chasm on to a jutting piece of rock. And there she stood and looked across at him, without a smile, but with the same calm, passionless contempt which had been her expression all through the business.

Warner would have gone back even then; but he heard Spencer Foyle's soft laugh of cynical amusement, and, not being a coward by any means, he sprang across the rift. Before he could reach her she had left it, and he saw her standing on the narrowest of ledges overhanging the lake. It was not very high, but the water was immediately below. There was certainly no room for two, and it looked a doubtful and dangerous place for even one.

"Come down, and don't be silly, there's a dear girl!" he said. "I mean to wait for you here, if I have to wait till the middle of next week. Come down, now!"

At this moment Spencer Foyle laid a hand upon his shoulder.

"That will do, Warner!" he said, with languid contempt for the whole business. "You'll get into trouble directly." He glanced towards the cottage, significantly. "Take my advice, and let her alone."

Warner bit his lips, and looked from the girl to him.

"Perhaps you're right," he said, with an uncomfortable laugh. "Though, by George! I should like to teach the young wild cat a lesson." Raising his hat with a mock salute, he drawled out: "Wait there till we come back, my girl!" and followed Spencer Foyle on to the road again.

Nora lowered herself till she half-reclined on the narrow ledge, and, leaning her head upon her hand, gazed over into the lake beneath. She had not been afraid for one moment; it might almost be said that she was not angry. The man's insolence had, so to speak, passed over her without making any impression. Had he ventured to climb to this, her last refuge, she would inevitably have pushed him over; and would have done it as promptly and as calmly as she had flung his coin into the lake.

She remained in this position, in this attitude, for some ten minutes. It was remarkable about this young girl that she

was as capable of intense repose as of alert and energetic movement. One can compare her with a young tigress—graceful, sinuous, and full of that lithe strength which is the crown of youth and health. Suddenly, as she lay in her perilous position, she heard the beat of horse's hoofs on the hard road above her. Her colour rose, her heart began to beat, and she leant forward, quite over the ledge, listening intently. Presently, through a narrow gap in the trees, she saw a horseman riding down the hill.

He was coming at full pelt—that is to say, the horse was tearing along at that easy gallop which a horse chooses of his own free will and for his own pleasure. It was a beautiful animal, black and glossy as satin, with the small head and arched neck of the Irish thoroughbred, and its rider may almost be said to have matched it. He was quite a young man, splendidly made, with a head well set on, and as high-bred a look as his steed. He was more than good-looking, for the face was indicative of spirit, and grace, and refined intelligence. The touch of melancholy in the dark eyes, the resolute curve of the lips, scarcely hidden by the slight moustache, never failed to attract the eyes of any woman who looked upon them. The figure was graceful, and, though slight, full of strength—one of those sinewy forms which serve as a setting for a high spirit and a resolute will.

He sat his horse with perfect ease, though the pace was nearly a racing one, and, as he rode, he glanced from side to side, as if he were greeting familiar objects. He passed the gap in the trees without seeing the figure on the shelf of rock; but, as he came abreast of it, so to speak, he pulled up the horse, and, standing up in the stirrup, craned over to catch a glimpse of the lake.

As he did so, the girl rose to her feet; the colour was burning in her face now, her eyes were glowing with a subdued light; a faint tremor seemed to run through her like an electric shock; for the first time in her life, probably, a feeling of dizziness attacked her. She put up her hand against the smooth surface of rock above her head, as if to steady herself, but found nothing to support her; her lithe body swayed to and fro for an instant, then she fell sheer into the lake below.

As she fell she uttered one reluctant cry.

The young man above heard it. For a moment he looked round with a startled air; then he flung himself from the horse, and, utterly regardless of it, plunged into the undergrowth of the hill.

## CHAPTER II.

HE fought rather than made his way through the bushes, and in a minute or two saw the lake below him, and the girl struggling in it. Taking off his coat as he ran, he made his way down the path, reached a narrow ledge lower than that from which she had fallen, and, with a shout of encouragement, dived in.

He was a strong and skilful swimmer, and, far too wary to approach his intended rescue immediately; he swam round her for a full circle, then caught her by the hair, and skilfully towed her ashore.

She was on her feet almost before he was on his; but it was he who first spoke.

"Nora!" he exclaimed, wiping the water from his eyes. "Why, Nora!"

She stood, her clothes clinging to her, her hair like a dark torrent down her back, her bosom heaving, her eyes glowing.

"Denis," she said, "why did you do it?"

He burst out laughing.

"My dear Nora," he said, "I didn't know! I didn't know it was you—you who can swim like a fish—but you weren't swimming when I saw you?"

"I—I fell from the rock above," pointing to it. "I was half-stunned—confused. Oh, Denis, you are quite wet!"

"Of course, I am!" he said, with a laugh. "I've just been in a wet place! But, so have you, for that matter. And think of *you* falling from anywhere! How did you come to do it? You used to be like a goat."

"I lost my foothold," she said. "Come to the cottage; you must dry." A certain shy gravity had come over her. She looked at him from under her long lashes, her head half turned away. It was as if he had suddenly become a stranger to her.

"Wait awhile," he said, eagerly, and, looking at her with all a young man's admiration, with all a young man's wonder and surprise at the mystic transformation which Nature works in a maiden in five years. "Let us wait a minute or two. Nora; I haven't had time to say how do you do."

"No; only time to save my life, Denis," she said, very anxiously.

"Oh, come now, Nora! Saved your life! And you that swim like a two-year-old salmon! It would be hard work to drown you, to say nothing of saving your life."

"I was stunned," she said. "I would have drowned!"

"What were you doing up there?" he asked, glancing up. "Just dreaming, as you used to do, Nora?"

"Just dreaming," she assented, looking straight before her.

He still had hold of her hand, and he pressed it, and drew the water from the fingers, in an almost unconscious caress. Her hand grew warm, and she drew it away from his, under the pretence of coiling up her hair. He looked at her in a rapt way, and said in a low voice:

"How changed you are, Norah! Why, I left you a little, wee bit of a girl—"

"I was within half an inch as tall as you," she said.

"—And now I come back and find you a—a young woman. It seems so short a time ago—now that I am here beside you again; and yet it has been a long, long time. Why, Nora, you're as tall as I am."

He took her by the arm, and, still a little shyly, drew her towards him.

"Why, yes, you are!" he said. "Can I have altered so much?"

She looked at him sideways, then lowered her eyes.

"You—are changed," she said.

"But only in height, Nora," he pleaded. "I am still the same Denis—your old playmate and friend."

She made no response to this, but turned and walked up the strip of beach which rose steeply from the margin of the lake.

"And now tell me the news, Nora," he said. "Your mother?"

"Is just the same," she said.

"And nothing has happened?" he asked.

"Nothing," she replied.

"And my uncle—is he well?"

"Yes," she said. "And he is expecting you. And you are all wet; you will be late. Where is your horse? I heard it."

"I left him on the road," he said, with a laugh. "He's there still, if he hasn't found his way back to his stables."

He spoke with careless light-heartedness; but she looked faintly troubled.

"Come to the cottage," she said. "You must dry your

clothes, or I must find you some others. Ah, I wish you had not done it!"

"And left you to drown?" he said, smiling. "That would be a nice way of serving an old friend, Nora."

"Tell me why you have come back," she said, ignoring the retort.

His face clouded for a moment. "I have come back, Nora, because I'm a failure," he said. "You'd hear it sooner or later, so I may as well tell you at once. I'm a rank failure, and I've come back like a bad penny."

She glanced at him with the divine compassion of a woman in her glorious eyes, and the hand nearest to him stole towards his, but she drew it back before the moment of contact.

"It's just been five years wasted, Nora, and worse. I told them before I went it was no use sending me. What was the use of sending a Dennison to study Law? You might as well send a wolf to tend sheep! I hated it from the beginning, Nora, and I hated it worse at the end."

His brows drew in a straight line across his dark eyes, and his lips set tightly for a moment.

"If I could only make you understand how I loathed it all! The poring over dull and dry books, in a little den they call chambers, while the sun was shining through the sooty windows and the birds were singing in the grimy trees. But it was the sun and it was the birds; and all the time I was thinking of Marishannon; yes, and of the little girl who used to sail her boat with me, and fish off the end of the rock there; and many's the time I've been tempted to fling the book out of the window, and follow it myself, and come straight to Marishannon, and never stop till I found myself on the lake again. And here I am, Nora, by your side once more!"

The colour rose and fell in her face, her bosom heaved under the red shawl, something—not the lake water—shone in her eyes. Every word he spoke was music; music that rang in her heart, and made the words all confused.

"And your uncle?" she said.

He threw out his hands, then thrust them in his pockets. "The old man is furious," he said. "He wrote me a letter—the first letter I ever got from him—just two lines. 'You mad devil, come home! No Dennison ever did any good. Come home.'"

"And so?" she said.

"So I have come home!" he said, with a laugh.

They had reached the cottage by this time. As he entered,

the woman leant forward in her chair, and uttered an exclamation of surprise and anxiety. He took her hand and laughed, with no shyness now.

"How are you, Mrs. Neil? Yes, I've come back, you see. And I've tumbled into the lake. And Nora—where's she gone?"

Mrs. Neil rose, trembling with nervousness. "You are wet through!" she said. "And his lordship waiting for you at the Hall! It will take time to dry your clothes—and his lordship's waiting and expecting you. What shall I do?"

"Don't you worry, now, Mrs. Neil," he said. "He's been waiting so long that another hour or two won't matter. He can't be angrier than he is already, and perhaps it'll give him time to cool; besides, it can't be helped. Is that tea I see there? Give me a cup, Mrs. Neil, and some of the home-made bread and butter I've been pining for for five years."

With trembling hands she poured out a cup for him, and he cut himself some bread and butter, talking all the while; and his clear, musical voice, and his strong, youthful presence, seemed to fill the tiny cottage with radiance and brightness. But all the while he talked he was listening for Nora; and presently she came in. Though she had been absent so short a time, she had managed to do up her hair and change her dress. She was breathing as if she had been running, and, glancing at him momentarily, she said, "There are some clothes in the next room."

"Why, where did you get them, Nora?" he asked.

"From Dan Murphy's," she said. "Change quickly, Mr. Denis."

"Thank you, *Miss* Neil!" he said, with an emphasis on the "Miss." "Who told you to call me 'Mr.,' Nora; or was it to teach me manners?"

She looked down, silent and statuesque, and the elder woman said, in a nervous way, "Times are changed. Nora is right."

He looked at the girl with smiling reproach, then went into the next room. In a few minutes he came out, laughing at the transformation the clothes had made.

"It's a fine suit, and Dan's best, and I must take care of it," he said.

"And now you'll be going?" said Mrs. Neil.

"Yes, I'll go, if Nora will go as far as the road with me; if not, I'll stop here forever!"

"Come, then!" she said; and she led the way out of the cottage. Mrs. Neil leant against the door, and watched them



as they went side by side up the steep path. The anxious, troubled look did not disappear with their departure, and her thin lips moved as if she were communing with herself or muttering a prayer.

Now, as they walked side by side, and, necessarily, very close to each other, a vague shyness and reserve again fell upon the girl, and communicated itself to the young man. They had parted five years ago, boy and girl; they were now man and woman. She had expected him to be changed, but not so greatly. She was not timid in the ordinary sense of the word, but the maidenly instinct warned her that the old childish days had passed, and, as his coat-sleeve brushed against her arm, a thrill that was not fear, nor pleasure, nor pain, ran through her.

As for him, he had had time since her return to the cottage to notice her exquisite beauty, and, while it stirred his pulses with delight, it inspired him with that awe which every true man feels in the presence of purity and loveliness.

So, though he had so much to say, so much to tell her of his life in London, of his debts, his failures; though he had come back thinking to pour out his heart to his "little Nora," in the presence of this tall, slim goddess, he found himself dumb! They came to the gate, and stood in silence for a moment or two, then she said:

"Go now, Denia."

"Thank you for not calling me 'Mr.,' Nora," he said, almost humbly. "I feared, when you called me so just now, that all—all was changed, and was going to be different between us; that I had lost my little playmate. But that's not so, Nora? 'Tell me; it's not so?'"

She looked beyond him with troubled eyes, not knowing what to say.

"I'll—I'll come to-morrow," he said. "Wait for me on the beach, in the old place, after breakfast."

She was silent a moment, then she said, in a low voice, "Yes," and turned and left him. After he had gone, she went back to the gate, and, hidden by the trees, lest he should look back, looked after him with all her soul in her pure, unconscious eyes.

A few minutes after he had gone, a man came up the road. He was a servant from the Hall—one of the grooms—and as he saw the glimmer of her dress, he stopped.

"Is that you, Nora?" he said. "And have you seen the young master on the road? His lordship's sent me out to look for him. They've begun dinner long ago," he went on,

Without waiting for her answer, "and the two gentlemen are going to stay the night."

"What two gentlemen?" she asked.

"They're two that's lost their way," he said. "There'll be high jinks at the Hall to-night, for the Lord's set wild-like at Master Denis not coming; and when he's wild—ah, well, you know!" With a significant laugh and a nod, he passed on.

The girl stood, still as a statue, thinking deeply; then suddenly, as if some sudden apprehension had smitten her, she started, ran quickly to the cottage, caught up a cloak, and throwing it round her, went towards the Hall, not by the road, but by a path through the wood, which opened immediately opposite the great gate.

Ten minutes before, Denis Dennison had passed through it, and, making his way up the avenue, had approached the house. It had grown dark by this time, and the moon had not yet risen, and every window of the Hall was streaming with light.

He looked up at the old house, with a glow of affection warming his heart. It was a noble pile, but with neglect and decay speaking eloquently from every line. There were rents in its rugged surface through which the trunks of the ivy had forced a way. The stonework of the terrace showed great gaps; one of the pair of lions which flanked the broad steps had lost its head; the steps themselves were broken, and grass was growing on them in the interstices.

Generation after generation of Dennisons had done its best—or its worst—to wreck the family fortunes. The present Lord was the maddest of them all. All his life he had been swayed by one impulse alone—that of his own will; and his career had been one of a reckless dissipation which had set the world agape.

He ought to have been crippled with gout, or bedridden, or dead, long ago; but the Dennison constitution had withstood the severest tests which even Lord Larry could set it, and the present Earl was a tall, and hale, and hearty man, who could out-ride most of his juniors, and out-drink all.

Denis stood under the last elm of the avenue, and looked and listened with a faint smile on his face. He could see the servants rushing to and fro in wild disorder, just as they had done five years ago; could hear their voices in shrill exhortation or expostulation; could catch the glimmer of glass and silver, as the butler and the footman bore portions of the dinner-service to and fro. He entered the Hall quite unnoticed.

This was not surprising, and was not because of the clothes which disguised him, but because all sorts and conditions of people were free to enter the place at all times and seasons.

The butler scarcely glanced at him—one footman almost pushed him aside. With the smile still on his face, he went to the door of the dining-room, and looked in. At the head of the table sat his uncle, the Earl, erect and stately, in his evening-dress; his face was flushed, his eyes were alight with the excitement caused by the advent of two unexpected guests.

Denis looked from his uncle to the visitors. Captain Warner was leaning back, his face red as brick-dust, his eyes staring. It was evident that he had dined not wisely, but too well. Opposite him sat Spencer Foyle, one arm over the back of his chair, the other resting on the table. He was watching the other two men with a cynical smile, which made the blood run quickly through young Denis's veins.

He was about to come forward, and announce himself, when Warner, setting down his empty glass, said, as he refilled it, and as if he were continuing the recital of some story:

"Yes; I was taken by surprise, I confess! The girl looked as calm as an icicle, and, by George! she never turned a hair, even when she flung the half-crown into the lake; and she didn't even run when I followed her, but stood as still as a statue till I tried to touch her!"

The Earl bent forward courteously, with a smile on his sharply-cut face.

"And then?" he said.

"Why," said Captain Warner, "she sprang like a blessed goat across a bit of a gulf."

"And, of course, you followed?" said the Earl.

"Of course," said Warner, with a complacent chuckle. "I was after her like a shot. I wanted a kiss for my coin, and, by Jove! I thought I'd got it; but she was off again like a chamois, and lodged on a bit of a ledge not three feet square, I'll swear."

The Earl laughed, and signed to the butler to refill the glasses.

"And what then?" he asked.

"Well, not being a member of the Alpine Club," said Warner, "I gave it up as a bad job, and I left her there. And there she may be still for all I know."

"It's a tame ending," said Foyle.

The Earl smiled rather darkly.

"It would have been a more tragic one if your friend had ventured to follow her. Our Irish girls, gentlemen, are not wont to sell their kisses, as they say some of your English lasses are. If Captain Warner had continued the chase, he would have found himself in Marishannon Lake, instead of—to my satisfaction—in Dennison Hall."

"By Jove! I think you're right," said Warner, with a loud laugh, as full of self-satisfaction as if he had been playing an heroic part.

Denis stood transfixed by a rage which threatened to choke him. His face was deathly white, his dark eyes blazing; the hands tightly clenched at his side were tingling with a desire to grip the tipsy cad by the throat. For a moment or two he was literally paralysed by the passion of furious indignation which the mental picture of Nora's distress, called up by Warner's recital, had aroused; then, suddenly, he strode across the room, took up a half-filled wineglass, and flung the contents full in Warner's face.

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### CHAPTER III.

THE assault, the deadly insult, was dealt so suddenly that it was like "a bolt from the blue." With the wine streaming down his face, Warner rose unsteadily, and, clutching wildly at the chair, which fell with a clatter to the ground, stared at the white, handsome face of the lad confronting him, stared for a moment with speechless amazement and fury.

The Earl rose, his clean-cut features distorted with anger and indignation, his eyes blazing. Spencer Foyle only half rose, then sank down again, and, with his cigarette still between his teeth, looked, with his keen, cynical smile, from Denis to Warner.

Warner found his voice at last.

"Who—what—?" He broke the question with an oath. "Who is it?" He turned from Denis to the Earl, as if appealing for satisfaction to the host in whose house the insult had been perpetrated; and it was the Earl who spoke next.

"Who is it?" he repeated, staring at Denis; then his face grew livid, and his eyes flashed like steel. "Denis—is it you?" he said, in a voice that smote the silence like ice falling on ice. "*You!* In my house—your own! Insult a guest! Are you mad, boy?"

Denis stood—as statuesque as even Nora could have stood—his hands clenched at his sides, his eyes fixed on the Earl.

"Captain Warner, what am I to say? What *can* I say?" said the Earl, stretching out his hands.

"You—you know this fellow?" stammered Warner, fiercely. "He belongs to the—the house?"

"He is my nephew," said the Earl. "Why he has done this thing I do not know. I cannot guess. I do not know why he is in this—this disguise! Yes, gentlemen, he is my nephew! I admit it, with shame!" He turned his eyes upon Denis. "Speak, sir!" he commanded, in a low but terrible voice. "Have you gone mad? What is the meaning of your conduct?"

Denis looked from the Earl to Warner.

"He knows," he said, and his voice sounded strangely like the Earl's—an echo of the clear, musical tones, though the music was made stern and harsh by passion. "He has insulted a woman, an unprotected girl. He—an officer and a gentleman!" He repeated the word with a scorn which his flashing eyes and curling lip made emphatic enough in all conscience. "He is a cur and a coward—"

The Earl's long, white hand fell upon the table, shivering a glass, and setting the silver ringing.

"Silence, sir!" he said, his voice still low, but clear and sharp as a bell. "You disgrace yourself, you disgrace *me*, and the name you bear. Who made you a judge of such things?" For a second his voice faltered, and grew less stern, as if Denis's words had reached his conscience. "Grant that Captain Warner had done all you charge him with, it would be no excuse for such an insult, perpetrated upon a guest. Apologise, sir—apologise, or by God—!" He raised his hand above his head, as if calling down vengeance.

Denis set his lips tight, and looked straight before him; and Warner, his face as red as the wine that stained his shirt front, blurted out passionately:

"Apologise? I cannot accept an apology. If the young fool were the clown he looks"—he ran his blood-shot eyes over Denis's fisherman's dress—"I might overlook it, put it down to his low-breeding; but—but he is your nephew, you say, my Lord—it's hard to believe!—and—"

The Earl bit his lip, silenced for a moment by Warner's refusal.

In London, in this, the end of the nineteenth century, in these degenerate days of ours, an insult, even so gross a one as that Denis had offered, goes for very little. The insulted one calls for the police, and gives his assailant in charge, appears against him the next morning before the magistrate,

and is usually satisfied with the lecture and the fine which is imposed; or he drags the offending party into the Law Courts, and gets him cast in swingeing damages. But in Ireland, especially in such remote parts as Marishannon, the police are not handy, and men of Warner's rank are still tempted to take the matter into their own hands. They like to return blow for blow, and still use the whip or sword to defend their honour.

"I want no apology—I accept none!" he exclaimed, his drawl quite forgotten, his blood-shot eyes half starting from his head.

The Earl extended his hand with a gesture of deprecation.

"What can I say, sir; what can I do? The boy is of my blood, is my heir, stands to me as a son. I apologise for him—"

Denis went round to the Earl's side, and laid a hand upon his arm.

"Don't do it, sir!" he exclaimed, agitatedly. "You shall not apologise for me! I—I would do it again, if I overheard this man boast of his cowardly attack upon a helpless girl—"

"Silence!" cried the Earl, sternly, as he shook off Denis's hand. "I repeat, I apologise for him, Captain Warner. Are you satisfied—"

"—He would be a worse cur than I think him, if he is!" said Denis. "Captain Warner knows he has to deal with me—not you, sir." He turned his dark eyes on Warner's face. "I don't apologise, Captain Warner."

Warner went from white to red, and back to white again, as he stared at the set, determined face, and into the eyes which flashed contempt and defiance at him. Then gradually his own eyes fell, his lips worked, and a smile of affected scorn twisted his thick lips.

"Of course, if you offer an apology, Lord Dennison, I—well, of course, I cannot refuse to accept it," he stammered. "This young gentleman appears to have put on manners to match his clothes, or to be out of his mind. When he has grown a little older, he will learn that only a coward—as he condescends to call me—insults a guest."

"You are no guest of mine!" said Denis, fiercely.

The Earl raised a glass, as if to hurl it at him, but let it fall with a crash to the floor.

"Silence, sir!" he said, sternly. "Thank your stars this gentleman has let you off so easily. Leave the room! Go and change your clothes, and—and return to us when you can do so as a gentleman!"

Denis stood for a second, as if reluctant to leave his foe; then, with a slight bow to Spencer Foyle, and a more marked one to the Earl, he left the room, with head erect and firm step.

The Earl motioned Warner to his seat, and, sinking into his own chair, beckoned to the butler, who stood at some distance from the table with the impassive face and manner of a man who has suddenly been stricken deaf and blind.

"Wine to Captain Warner," he said, sternly. "Leave the room," he added, after the man had brought fresh decanters and glasses. "Now, gentlemen, I beg you will endeavour to forget this painful incident. God knows, it is the first of the kind that has occurred beneath my roof. You have been good enough to accept my apology, Captain Warner, and I will not attempt to urge any excuse for my nephew. I will only beg you to remember that—well, that he is Irish, and that with us, when the blood is up, the wit is out. He is young and—wild." He sighed. "We have all been wild in our time, gentlemen; but, there, I will not plead for him! Permit me to fill your glass, Captain Warner."

He leant forward with the decanter, with exquisite courtesy and deprecation.

"After all, there is some excuse," said Spencer Foyle. He had not uttered a word during the strange scene, but had sat, his head leaning on his hands, his eyes going from one face to the other, keenly watchful, and cynically cold and unmoved.

"What?" demanded Warner, flushing, and leaning forward.

"In fact, a great deal of excuse," said Foyle, slowly and coolly. "Captain Warner seems to think it quite the privilege, if not the duty, of the soldier to make love to every woman he meets; and it would seem that the young men, as well as the young ladies, in this country object to such—galantry."

The Earl inclined his head slightly, but significantly. He was too courteous a host to join in a more direct rebuke of a guest.

"And, from Mr. Denis's tone, I imagine that he knew the girl?" continued Foyle. He spoke interrogatively, but with a listless, languid tone of indifference.

"What was she like?" asked the Earl.

"Oh! a deuced good-looking girl," exclaimed Warner.

"Dark, with violet eyes," said Foyle. "She was dressed like a peasant—a fisherman's daughter, for instance; but there was something refined and well-bred about her. She

looked above the class her dress belonged to. Her way of pitching Captain Warner's half-crown into the lake was rather fine, and not at all stagey."

"Where did you find her?" asked the Earl. "Just round the bend of the road?"

"Yes," said Foyle. "She was standing near a small gate, opening on to a path, through a kind of wood spinney."

The Earl nodded.

"It was Nora Neil," he said. He filled his glass, and held it up to the light, in a mechanical way, as if he were reflecting. "Yes, it was Nora. You are right, Mr. Foyle; my nephew Denis knows her; in fact, they have known each other all their lives; have been playmates and companions since they were babies. I had no children," he continued, as if in explanation, "and Denis was brought up by me. The boy was lonely, and needed a companion, and little Nora was allowed the run of the place—as every one in Marishannon is!" he put in with a smile. "They played on the rocks like two boys. Indeed, Nora can bowl, and bat, and box, and fence as well as most lads; Denis taught her."

"That explains your nephew's warm defence of her," said Foyle.

The Earl inclined his head.

"Thank you, sir," he said, in the courtly fashion which never deserted him—even after the third bottle, and in his most reckless mood. "As you say, the girl is above her class. Her mother is a—superior kind of woman. She has seen a great deal of trouble. She married a harum-scarum fellow, of bad character, who disappeared before the girl was born. What became of him no one knows; his wife may have heard from him, but, if so, she held her tongue. She is a reticent, silent kind of woman—a great invalid. She is also above her class. But that is owing, no doubt, to the fact that she was a nurse for some years in the family of my neighbour, Lord Esdaile. His place is about half a dozen miles from here; you passed it on your way, and would have seen it but for the trees. Nora was born—unexpectedly—while her mother was at Esdaile House, nursing Lady Esdaile; in fact, Mrs. Neil is Lady Blanche's foster-mother. I'm afraid I confuse, not to say bore, you," he broke off.

"Not at all," responded Foyle. "On the contrary, I am much interested. As I understand it, Lady Blanche is Lady Esdaile's daughter, and was born—"

"—A fortnight after Nora," said the Earl. "Our servants, unlike yours in England, often step into the position of



confidential intimates, and even friends. Lady Eadale treated Mrs. Neil almost like the latter. As I said, that accounts for Mrs. Neil's and her daughter's air of refinement and breeding. The Irish are rare imitators, and as quick to catch a manner or a tone as a—a—monkey or a parrot."

"The girl's indignation at Captain Warner's—gallantry is easily understood," said Foyle.

Warner was half asleep—he had not paid the least attention to the conversation up to this point—but he caught the pause before the word "gallantry," and fired up.

"If you mean to insinuate that I have acted in a way unbecoming an officer and a gentleman—I" he began, in a voice thick with wine; but the Earl waved his hand.

"I will answer for it that Mr. Foyle intended nothing offensive, Captain Warner. No more wine? Sure? Well! the room is warm; shall we go on the terrace?"

He led the way through the tall French windows, and the two men—Warner with unsteady gait—followed him.

The moon had risen, and was flooding the broad terrace and its broken stone rail and crumbling vases with a soft light. The house, with its diamond windows and climbing ivy, looked like the Deserted House in Hood's poem; and Foyle, leaving the Earl and Warner seated on a bench, lit a cigarette, and sauntered along the terrace. At the extreme end of it he saw a tall, slim figure leaning over the railing. It was Denis. He had changed Dan Murphy's clothes for evening-dress, but his face was still pale, and the passion which had found vent in the dining-room was still smouldering in his eyes.

As Foyle went up to him, he stood erect, and waited, with a frown and an antagonistic air.

"A glorious night," said Foyle, in his softest voice. "I am glad to have an opportunity, Mr.—" He paused.

"My name is Dennison," said Denis, stiffly.

"—Mr. Dennison, to express my regret that my companion's indiscretion should have caused so much unpleasantness," concluded Foyle.

Denis looked at him coldly.

"This Captain Warner is a friend of yours, Mr.—?" He, too, paused.

"Foyle, Spencer Foyle," said Foyle.

"—Mr. Foyle?"

Foyle shrugged his shoulders.

"I can scarcely lay claim to the title of friend," he said, listlessly. "Captain Warner and I met by chance at the inn at Lenny last night. That is the extent of our intimacy."

"I am sorry," said Denis, turning away, as if he desired no further conversation with Captain Warner's "acquaintance."

"May I ask why?" said Foyle.

Denis turned quickly.

"Because I should have asked you to take a message to that gentle—Captain Warner," he replied.

Spencer Foyle's hand went to his lips to hide the cynical smile.

"If the duel were still in vogue, I should almost imagine you intended sending him a challenge," he said, lightly.

"Why not?" demanded Denis, his eyes flashing. "No, we don't fight now—more's the pity. *We* don't, but only just across the Channel there are still men who attach some value to honour. If we were in France—"

"But we're not!" said Foyle, with a smile.

"No," said Denis. "And so Captain Warner thinks he can insult a helpless woman with impunity, and is content to endure insult himself so long as he can get an apology from a third person, who is no party to the quarrel! He is a coward!"

Foyle leant his back against the stone coping, and looked at the handsome, ardent face through his half-closed eyelids.

"Captain Warner is a fool, but I don't think he is a coward," he said, slowly.

"Then let him prove it!" retorted Denis.

Foyle laughed softly.

"But how, my dear sir? Do you want him to step out here, take off his coat, and box you?"

"Yes, that is what I should like," said Denis, promptly.

Foyle laughed again.

"My dear Mr. Dennison, men of your and Captain Warner's rank don't fight like costermongers! Now, if you could challenge him to mortal combat with the sword or the pistol—"

"Why not?" demanded Denis, sharply, as if he had been brooding over the same idea. "Captain Warner must want to fight me as badly as I want to fight him. We can't do it like Englishmen, as you say; why not in the old way? A better way than going to law."

Foyle bit his lip. He felt the desire to laugh aloud, but something in the young man's face restrained him.

"Would you propose swords or pistols?" he asked, with mock gravity.

Denis shrugged his shoulders.

"I shouldn't care which," he replied. "I can use both."

Captain Warner is a soldier; he must—or he ought to—know how to use his sword.”

Foyle looked down thoughtfully, then glanced at the other couple on the seat. He disliked this man Warner immensely—his contempt for him was too great to admit of hatred, but he went very near it—and the idea of luring the gallant captain into a ridiculous situation occurred to him pleasantly.

“Oh, no doubt Captain Warner can fence,” he said; “it is part of his business; and I’ve as little doubt that he’d jump at the chance of slicing a piece off you, or running you through—”

“—Then!” broke in Denis, eagerly.

“But, my dear sir, he doesn’t carry his sword about with him.”

“That will make no difficulty,” said Denis. “There is a stand of arms in the Hall. I have a pair of old duelling rapiers in my room.”

Once more Foyle had hard work to restrain his laughter; but he maintained his gravity.

“And you seriously propose fighting Captain Warner?” he said.

“Only give me the chance!” was the curt response, made with a sharp, short breath.

Foyle nodded.

“You are in earnest, I see.”

“I am,” said Denis. “Captain Warner has grossly insulted a young lady—”

“A young lady!” put in Foyle, softly.

Denis flushed.

“Yes, a young lady!” he repeated, sternly. “Every woman is a lady in the eyes of a gentleman.”

“I stand rebuked!” said Foyle, with a half-mocking bow.

“I have known her since we were children—all my life; I am her friend. I want to punish the cad who has insulted her. I’d horsewhip him if I had the chance; but I shan’t have. He can give me the chance of fighting him in fair play, if he likes.”

“Can he? How?” asked Foyle, with well-simulated listlessness.

“I have thought it all out,” said Denis, lowering his voice. “There is a small meadow—paddock—behind the house; it is hidden from the windows by a bark of firs—you can see them from here.”

Foyle nodded.

“Yes?”

"I will meet you and Captain Warner there at four o'clock to-morrow morning."

Foyle eyed him with a covert smile.

"You are good enough to include me?"

"Yes," said Denis. "You will act as his second."

"And who will be yours?"

"I shall not need one," said Denis, quietly. "You can act for both."

"I am exceedingly honoured by your confidence in me, Mr. Dennison," said Foyle.

Denis looked at him quickly, as if suspicious of sarcasm; but Foyle's face was like a mask, bland, impassive.

"And you propose that, at four o'clock, we should stalk through the house, announcing that we are going to commit the anachronism of fighting a duel in the paddock behind the firs, Mr. Dennison?"

Denis flushed.

"You appear inclined to treat the matter as a—joke," he said, sternly.

"Pardon me, I am almost as serious as you," responded Foyle. "But as I have not acted in a duel before, I am, naturally, desirous of being well coached in the mode of procedure. Pray explain your plans—for I see you have them all cut and dried."

"Yes," said Denis, with a long breath, "I have. We can leave the house without being heard. There is a small door, under the staircase in the hall, which leads to the garden. I will come down, unlock the door, and carry out the swords before I go to bed, and leave the door unlocked. We can start out one by one about four o'clock, and Captain Warner can have an opportunity of proving himself no coward, and I—"

"Will have a chance of avenging the—young lady," Foyle finished for him.

Denis's face flushed.

"Do you agree? Will you take my message—challenge—to Captain Warner?" he asked, laconically.

Foyle hesitated for a moment. He detested trouble of any kind, but he loved, with all the ardour of a heartless and thoroughly selfish man, anything that would inflict humiliation on his fellow-men. It would be amusing to see these two—the blatant bully and this hot-headed young fool—playing at duelling. It would be like rehearsing a scene in an opera; the half-ruined ancestral mansion, the paddock behind the firs, the moonlight—why, the scenery was perfect! And the char-

acters—the stately, proud and old-world Earl, the dissipated bully, the hot, headstrong lad—the characters were all there! And it was going to be played for his sole amusement! It was irresistible.

“It is an honour I cannot bring myself to refuse. Yes, at the risk of making myself ridiculous, Mr. Dennison, I will take your”—he laughed softly—“your challenge! Mind, I don’t say it will be accepted. Let me remind you that we are living in the end of the nineteenth century, and in England—”

“Ireland,” interrupted Denis, swiftly. “And that makes all the difference!”

Foyle shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

“Well, really, I’m inclined to agree with you,” he said. He looked round curiously. “I can scarcely believe that we are within reach of civilisation—I beg your pardon! Of course, you know what I mean. We might be living in the middle of the last century.” He waved his hand in an explanatory gesture. “Yes, I’ll take your message. By the way, has it occurred to you that you may get the worst of this encounter? Captain Warner is certain to be a good swordsman, and—” He raised his thin, dark eyebrows significantly.

“I am not afraid,” said Denis, quietly. “I can fence—but, even if I could not, I would fight him, with anything.”

Foyle glanced up at the handsome, resolute face with a slow, reluctant admiration.

“You don’t lack courage, Mr. Dennison,” he said. “Will you wait here? I will try and get an opportunity of speaking to Captain Warner.”

Denis assented with a nod.

“*Make him fight!*” he said, between his teeth. “Tell him I think he is a coward and a cur.”

Foyle laughed.

“Oh, it’s scarcely necessary to tell him that. He knows your opinion of him already,” he said, as he sauntered away.

As he approached the seat where the other two men were seated, the Earl rose.

“Captain Warner is talking of bed, Mr. Foyle,” he said, with a laugh, as if the idea of needing rest were supremely ridiculous, “but I’m for another bottle; or, what do you say to some whisky? They shall bring it. Excuse me a moment, while I speak to my nephew.”

He went along the terrace to Denis, who stood erect to re-

ceive him, with the respect of a young man who has been taught to revere his elders.

"Well, sir, this is a bad home-coming!" said the Earl.

"I am sorry, sir," said Denis, gravely. "I told you that I should fail, and I have failed."

"Yes, you were a true prophet," retorted the Earl. "But I was not speaking of your failure. That's of very little moment. I was referring to your abominable conduct this evening. Why were you masquerading in those clothes?"

"I got the others wet—by an accident," said Denis, "and borrowed Dan Murphy's."

"And his manners with them!" said the Earl, grimly. "Why do you not make the best amends in your power? Why do you stand sulking here? Go and speak to the man!"

"I can't do that, sir," said Denis, quietly. Then his eyes flashed, and he met the old man's gaze straight.

"Why do you ask me to talk to such a cad? I am in the right, and you know it, sir!"

"What! You'll teach me right and wrong!" flashed back the Earl. "I know the man is a cad, sir, as well as you do; but he is my guest, and, while he is under my roof, he must be treated as if he were a gentleman. That may seem foolish and old-fashioned to your modern ideas; but it is my code, and I expect you to conform to it! Go and be civil to the man."

"I can't," said Denis. "You ask too much, sir."

The Earl's brows worked up and down, and he seemed on the point of bursting into a rage, but he checked it.

"We'll have no more brawling to-night, Denis!" he said, grimly. "If you cannot be civil to my guest, best go to bed. I will talk to you in the morning."

Denis inclined his head, and moved away, and the Earl, calling to the butler, went towards the house.

Foyle had stood looking down at Warner for a moment or two, then he touched him on the shoulder.

"Are you awake, Warner?" he said, coldly.

Warner raised his head, and yawned.

"Yes; I wish I wasn't! Why the devil doesn't the old fool let us go to bed?"

"I see you are awake," said Foyle. "Are you sober also?"

"I'm sober enough," replied Warner, sullenly.

"That's all right," said Foyle, blandly, "because I'm the bearer of a challenge from Mr. Dennison—the Earl's nephew, you know. You haven't forgotten him, I suppose?" he added, with a sneer.

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The Earl's brows worked up and down, and he seemed on the point of bursting into a rage, but he checked it.

"We'll have no more brawling to-night, Denis!" he said, grimly. "If you cannot be civil to my guest, best go to bed. I will talk to you in the morning."

Denis inclined his head, and moved away, and the Earl, calling to the butler, went towards the house.

Foyle had stood looking down at Warner for a moment or two, then he touched him on the shoulder.

"Are you awake, Warner?" he said, coldly.

Warner raised his head, and yawned.

"Yes; I wish I wasn't! Why the devil doesn't the old fool let us go to bed?"

"I see you are awake," said Foyle. "Are you sober also?"

"I'm sober enough," replied Warner, sullenly.

"That's all right," said Foyle, blandly, "because I'm the bearer of a challenge from Mr. Dennison—the Earl's nephew, you know. You haven't forgotten him, I suppose?" he added, with a sneer.



acters—the stately, proud and old-world Earl, the dissipated bully, the hot, headstrong lad—the characters were all there! And it was going to be played for his sole amusement! It was irresistible.

“It is an honour I cannot bring myself to refuse. Yes, at the risk of making myself ridiculous, Mr. Dennison, I will take your”—he laughed softly—“your challenge! Mind, I don’t say it will be accepted. Let me remind you that we are living in the end of the nineteenth century, and in England—”

“Ireland,” interrupted Denis, swiftly. “And that makes all the difference!”

Foyle shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

“Well, really, I’m inclined to agree with you,” he said. He looked round curiously. “I can scarcely believe that we are within reach of civilisation—I beg your pardon! Of course, you know what I mean. We might be living in the middle of the last century.” He waved his hand in an explanatory gesture. “Yes, I’ll take your message. By the way, has it occurred to you that you may get the worst of this encounter? Captain Warner is certain to be a good swordsman, and—” He raised his thin, dark eyebrows significantly.

“I am not afraid,” said Denis, quietly. “I can fence—but, even if I could not, I would fight him, with anything.”

Foyle glanced up at the handsome, resolute face with a slow, reluctant admiration.

“You don’t lack courage, Mr. Dennison,” he said. “Will you wait here? I will try and get an opportunity of speaking to Captain Warner.”

Denis assented with a nod.

“*Make* him fight!” he said, between his teeth. “Tell him I think he is a coward and a cur.”

Foyle laughed.

“Oh, it’s scarcely necessary to tell him that. He knows your opinion of him already,” he said, as he sauntered away.

As he approached the seat where the other two men were seated, the Earl rose.

“Captain Warner is talking of bed, Mr. Foyle,” he said, with a laugh, as if the idea of needing rest were supremely ridiculous, “but I’m for another bottle; or, what do you say to some whisky? They shall bring it. Excuse me a moment, while I speak to my nephew.”

He went along the terrace to Denis, who stood erect to re-

ceive him, with the respect of a young man who has been taught to revere his elders.

"Well, sir, this is a bad home-coming!" said the Earl.

"I am sorry, sir," said Denis, gravely. "I told you that I should fail, and I have failed."

"Yes, you were a true prophet," retorted the Earl. "But I was not speaking of your failure. That's of very little moment. I was referring to your abominable conduct this evening. Why were you masquerading in those clothes?"

"I got the others wet—by an accident," said Denis, "and borrowed Dan Murphy's."

"And his manners with them!" said the Earl, grimly. "Why do you not make the best amends in your power? Why do you stand sulking here? Go and speak to the man!"

"I can't do that, sir," said Denis, quietly. Then his eyes flashed, and he met the old man's gaze straight.

"Why do you ask me to talk to such a cad? I am in the right, and you know it, sir!"

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Warner started up at him with angry amazement.

"What did you say—a challenge?" he said. "What the devil do you mean?"

"What I say," replied Foyle, slowly and distinctly. "Mr. Dennison proposes to afford you 'satisfaction' in the sweet old way. He wants to fight you—with swords." He could scarcely repress the smile. "He has everything ready—the place, the hour, the weapons; and he only waits your acceptance."

"Thin kind of joke!" said Warner, with an attempt at an imitation of Foyle's sneer.

"It's no joke; the young fellow is as serious as—as a church clock," said Foyle. "He begged me to assure you that he considered you a coward and a cur."

Warner rose heavily, but Foyle pressed him down again.

"Keep quiet, or you will attract the attention of the 'old fool'—and so baulk the young one!" he added, under his breath. "Surprises you, doesn't it? So it did me. But, after all, I don't know what you can do. You'd have to fight him if we were across the Channel, you know."

"What cursed nonsense!" growled Warner; but his colour came and went, and his blood-shot eyes glanced at the wine-stains on his shirt front. "He knows I can't fight him."

"All right. I'll tell him so. And, of course, he'll tell everybody else so. Your fellow-officers at the barracks, for instance"—Warner's face flushed hotly—"and, by Jove! I shouldn't be surprised if he waited for you in the morning with a horsewhip! He looks quite capable of it. A fine young fellow!"

Warner uttered an oath. He was feeling more sober every moment.

"By God! I'd like to!" he muttered.

"There's nothing to prevent you," said Foyle, half-contemptuously. "You're the offended party, you know; and it you teach him a lesson—well, it will be no more than he deserves. After all, you can't—as an officer—do nothing. You must either drag him into the nearest police court—which, by the way, would be rather unpleasant for you; you wouldn't shine, Warner, I assure you!"

Warner rose, and glared towards the motionless figure at the end of the terrace, and then at Foyle's pale, contemptuous face.

"Look here," he said, "if this is a joke, it's in damned bad taste, Foyle; but if the young fool's in earnest—well, I'm his man."

"You will fight him—with swords?"

"I'll fight him, or horsewhip him, curse him!" said Warner, with an oath.

"All right, then, I'll arrange it—or, rather, it's all arranged. I'll wake you about four, and take you to the place young Dennison has fixed on—just behind the house. By-the-way, you can fence?"

"Can a duck swim?" retorted Warner.

"Very good; I thought you could. But, see here, Warner, we don't want—at any rate, *I* don't want—to figure in a police report. No blood and thunder business, you know. Just knock the sword out of his hand, and make a fool of the young ass—it won't be difficult!—and have done with it."

"I'll—!"

"Hold your tongue—the old man is coming back. You haven't a light? I dare say Mr. Dennison has one." He sauntered back to Denis. "Captain Warner, like Barkis, 'is willing,' Mr. Dennison," he said, with mock gravity. "I'll bring him to the paddock; and I sincerely trust—you won't hurt each other."

The sneer was only half-suppressed, and Denis, with a flush of anger, inclined his head, and walked away without a word, and entered the house.

Two minutes afterwards, a figure, which had been crouching as motionless as the bracken which concealed it, below the terrace, stole like a shadow from the spot.

It was Nora.

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#### CHAPTER IV.

DENIS went up to his room. It was in the oldest part of the old house, and connected with the newer part by a long passage. The walls were panelled, and on the panels hung the treasures of his boyhood—a set of boxing-gloves, fishing-rods, a gun or two, stuffed trout, gazing through eyes as glassy as their cases; and a collection of swords and pistols large and varied enough to set any boy's heart beating. Amongst them was an old-fashioned pair of rapiers, and Denis took them down with hands that actually shook with eagerness.

The vision of Nora flying from her persecutor, and driven by him into the lake, seemed burnt upon his brain like the picture in a sensitive plate.

He got a piece of wash-leather, and wiped the swords tenderly, examined their razor-like points, made a lunge or two

to try his hand, then, wrapping the weapons in his coat, went softly down the stairs, and out of the house by the door at the back of the hall.

Keeping in the shadow of the house and the trees, he reached the paddock, and, concealing the swords behind a boulder, amongst the bushes, made his way back—unseen thus far. But, as he stole through the hall on tiptoe, the Earl came to the dining-room door, and caught sight of him.

Lord Larry looked after Denis for a moment with a curious gaze. He knew what the Dennisons were—knew with what persistence they followed in the wake of love or honour; and, with a smile, he waited till Denis had disappeared. Then he quietly followed him to the head of the passage, the only connecting link with the old part of the house, and, locking the heavy door, put the key in his pocket.

Denis was safe for that night, at least. In the morning the two men would take their departure, and the affair would be ended.

Denis had no sooner reached his room than a sudden fear of the thing that had actually occurred smote him. Supposing that his uncle should suspect something of what was taking place, and lock him in! He went back along the passage, tried the door, and found it locked! For a moment or two he stood aghast and furious. It was no use to shout, for the Earl would only laugh at the success of his manoeuvre, and no servant would dare to unlock the door, even if he could get possession of the key.

Denis went back to his room, fuming. His enemy would escape him, after all. Nora would remain unavenged.

He went to the window, but with no hope of egress that way, for it was heavily barred. Often and often he had asked, ordered, the removal of the obsolete protection; but to issue an order, and to get it executed, were two very different things at Dennison Hall. He took hold of one of the bars and tried to shake it, but it stood as firm as a rock; and a search for some instrument with which to file through a bar or remove it, proved the "Jack Sheppard" kind of story to be a mere invention of the novelist, and a hideous fraud. Each bar, at top and bottom, was set solidly into the stone, and only a mason with proper tools could release it.

Denis leant against the window, and set his teeth, as a dog sets his when it is chained to a kennel within sight of its foe. He was a prisoner and helpless, and in all probability Warner would brand him, when he did not keep his appointment, as the coward Denis had called Warner himself. It was a mad-

dening reflection, and Denis felt the sweat break out on his forehead, and his brain grow hot.

Suddenly, as he stood there, he saw a figure moving in the shadow of the house. He leant out as far as he could, and, in a whisper, asked:

"Who is there?"

The figure disappeared for a moment, then came out from just underneath.

"Denis!" rose a soft, clear voice.

"Nora! Is it you?"

"Yes," she said.

"Thank God!" he breathed. "Nora, I want to speak to you. Can you get nearer? I must not be heard."

She went in towards the wall, and he saw her climbing up to him by the thick ivy.

He knew she could climb like a cat—had he not taught her himself?—but he whispered a word of warning.

"Take care! take care!"

She looked up at him, without a smile on her face, which, in the shadow of the bright moonlight, looked ghostlike in its loveliness, and still ascended, until she stood upon a buttress of the thick, old wall, which made a kind of platform. By kneeling, he brought his face almost on a level with hers.

"Nora, you here!" he said, in a low, hushed voice. "What are you doing here?"

She did not answer the question; but, womanlike, asked one herself.

"You wanted me, Denis?" she said; and through the storm and stress of his mind, her voice stole like a strain of music.

"Yes—yes!" he said. He paused for a moment. How should he tell her? "Nora, I—I am in trouble. I am locked up here."

"Locked up?" she said.

He nodded.

"Yes, I— Can any one see you?"

She shook her head.

"I have had a— a quarrel with a man here, a Captain Warner."

"What about?" she asked, looking away from him.

"Oh, it doesn't matter! I can't stop to tell you. But it was rather—rather a serious quarrel, and we arranged to meet at four o'clock in the paddock—and talk it over, just talk it over. And here I am, locked up like a schoolboy! It's the Earl. If he lived until I was grey-headed, he'd refuse to believe I was a man! And if I don't turn up, this fellow will say



that I was afraid to meet him, and—and talk it over. Do you see—understand? Ah! Nora, you do!”

“Yes,” she said. That was all.

“Very well. You must help me! You will, Nora? Go to Cronin”—Cronin was the butler, an old friend, and always an ally of Denis’s—“and tell him to go to Captain Warner, and say that I will meet him at Lenny to-morrow. I will go to the inn and arrange—that is, talk the business over with him.”

She leant her head against the bare arm twined round the bar, and seemed lost in thought for a moment; and, impatient of her hesitation, he went on again:

“You must do this, Nora; you *must*! My honour is concerned. You understand—my honour! The fellow will brand me as a coward, will have the right to laugh at me.” His voice choked.

She raised her eyes to his.

“I understand, Denis,” she said. Once again her loveliness smote him, almost turned the passionate current of his thoughts aside.

“You will do this, Nora? You will save my honour?” he asked, earnestly.

“Yes,” she said. She drew a long breath. “He shall not say you are a coward, Denis.”

“Nora, how can I thank you? You brave girl, to climb like this, and stand there so quietly and calmly! How can I thank you?”

“Don’t try,” she said.

“No, it wouldn’t be any use! How tall you look in the half-light! You look more womanish even than you did this afternoon, when you startled me by the change in you. But you are still the old Nora.”

“Yes,” she said.

He looked at the white arm so near him; and, as if she felt his eyes upon it, she slid it from the bar.

“Rest easy, Denis,” she said, calmly; and began to descend. He watched her breathlessly—though there was no cause for anxiety—watched her until her slim figure had passed beyond his sight. Then he flung himself upon the bed, every nerve thrilling as, perhaps, only an Irish lad’s can thrill.

The tower clock struck four. Denis heard the strokes, and paced to and fro, feverishly, and a moment or so afterwards Foyle and Warner stole from the house, and across the garden to the paddock.

“It’s a ridiculous business!” growled Warner, sullenly,

"and there's nobody here," he added, looking round. The dawn had broken, and the sky was bright with a warm grey, against which the tall firs stood darkly, like dumb spectators of the strange scene. "The young fool has thought better of it, and funk'd the idiotic business! Lucky for him he has, for I'm in a deuce of a temper, and just in the humour to mark the beggar for life. Let's go back and get to bed, curse it!"

Foyle looked round the solitude, with a feeling of surprise and some disappointment. He was going to be robbed of his amusement, after all; the farce was "off"! Then his eyes gleamed, for a figure in a cloak had slipped out from under the firs.

"You're a little premature," he said. "There's our man, right enough. Now, I hope I shan't make a fool of myself, and forget your instructions!"

He went up to the figure, looking up at the sky as he did so, for the light was bad, very bad.

"You're determined to see this out, Dennison?" he said, with a half-sneer. "There's time even now to draw back."

For answer the cloaked figure extended the two swords in proper fashion, hilt forward. Foyle shrugged his shoulders, and smiled, as he bent and tried them, and handing one back, carried the other to Warner.

"You'll take your positions now," he said. "Mr. Dennison, as Captain Warner is the person challenged, he has the choice: I place him here." He signed to Warner to stand with his face to the light—the disadvantageous position, of course; but Warner, beyond a growl, offered no protest, and, removing his coat and waistcoat, struck the first attitude.

His opponent waited until the last moment, then swiftly took off the cloak, flung it a few yards, and, as swiftly, fell into the proper attitude.

"When I say 'Three,' you will engage, gentlemen," said Foyle. "One, two, *three!*"

The swords met, and the fight commenced. At the very beginning, Warner was surprised by the neatness of his opponent's play, by the dexterity with which he parried Warner's efforts to touch him. He found himself, after a moment or two, fencing more carefully, and presently knew that his point had touched his man.

Foyle saw it too, and raised his hand.

"Stop!" he said. "You were touched, Mr. Dennison. That will do."

But there was no response, the slim figure still stood its

ground, with sword in position, and Warner, with a "The young fool!" resumed the duel.

Perhaps his success made him over-confident and careless, for he pressed the tierce hard, and lunged for his opponent's arm. It was a clever lunge; but it was made in too open a position, and to his own and Foyle's amazement, his foe's sword ran like lightning across his own, and pierced his breast.

It was done in an instant, and the next his sword had fallen with a dull clank upon the ground, and he stood staring before him, and swaying to and fro stupidly.

Foyle ran to him and caught him.

"Are you badly hurt? Speak, Warner!" Then, without waiting for an answer, he looked over his shoulder.

"You have killed him, for all I know! Run for some assistance! Quick!"

The slim figure caught up the cloak, drew it tightly round it, then passed into the darkness of the fir.

A few minutes later Denis heard a rustling of the ivy beneath his window, and sprang to it.

Looking down, he saw a dark form climb slowly up, and stand in the buttress. He thought he must be dreaming, for the figure wore a man's clothes—surely his own, which he had left at the cottage!—and the white shirt gleamed in the half light.

"Who is it?" he cried, hoarsely. "Who—!"

Then he fell back with amazement; for the face uplifted was that of Nora's, and it was her voice that said, as she held up a sword to him.

"Take back your sword, Denis; no one will know!"

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## CHAPTER V.

DENIS still thought that he must be dreaming. A woman, younger even than himself, would have jumped at the truth, and have understood what had happened, at the first glimpse of the sword and the male attire; but men, even the quickest of them, are slow; and Denis leant out between the bars, and took the sword and stared in speechless amazement.

"Why! what does this mean? Where did you get this sword? And—and you have got my clothes on, Nora!"

She was very white—he thought it was the moonlight that made her face look like ivory—but a faint colour rose to her cheek, and her long lashes drooped lower.

"There—there—was no other way," she said, in a very

low voice. "I found the sword all right. I overheard you talking on the terrace—"

He gazed at her, not yet comprehending.

"Heard me on the terrace? But—but what have you been doing with my sword, Nora?"

She looked at him for a moment, and her hand closed more tightly on the bar, round which her arm was twined.

"Did you send my message to Captain Warner, through Cronin? What I can't make out is, why you have got the sword, and why—why you have got my clothes on?"

In his stupid bewilderment, he passed his hand mechanically along the sword, and, feeling something damp upon it, looked at his hand.

"Great heavens! what is this?" he exclaimed. "It—it looks like—yes, it is blood! Nora, tell me what this means! What have you been doing?"

She glanced at him again, deprecatingly, but with the splendid calm which distinguished her.

"There was no other way, Denis. Don't be angry. No one will know; *they* do not know, did not guess. I hope I did not kill him."

"Kill—" A light began to break in upon his masculine denseness. "Do you—mean—to say—that you have been fighting a duel with Captain Warner?" he gasped.

She made a faint assent with her eyelids and lips.

"*You!* Fight—with swords! Nora!" His face flushed, and he gazed into her face. "I see it all! Good God! *You*—a girl—fought! Nora, it is wonderful, wonderful! And—you have hurt him?"

"Yes," she said.

"What made you think of it? How did the idea come into your head?" he exclaimed, under his breath.

She shook her head.

"I do not know. It was the thought of what you had said, about your honour, Denis. I was afraid Cronin might make a mistake, and not take the message; and that these men would go away, and—and laugh at you, and say you were afraid to come. Then I remembered that you had left your clothes at the cottage, and I went home—" Her face flushed scarlet for a moment, and her head drooped still lower. "Then I came back and found the swords—I knew you would hide them behind the big stone—and I waited. And presently they came." Her face went from red to white.

"But why didn't they recognise you—see that it wasn't me?" he asked.

"I kept the cloak round me, and I was in the shadow. And the man—the thin, pale man with the dark eyes, Mr. Foyle—put Captain Warner with his face to the light—"

"But—but—great Heaven, it seems impossible! Your hair, Nora!"

"I—I cut it off," she said, calmly.

His hand went out and rested on her head. It met, not the wealth of silken tresses which had so often blown across his face, and got into his eyes, in their childish days, but soft, waves, almost as short as his own. At his touch she shivered a little, as if she were cold—though the thrill that ran through her was warm enough.

"Your hair—your beautiful hair! You cut it off! Oh, Nora!" he grieved.

"It does not matter," she said, indifferently, "it will grow again."

"Are you sure, quite sure—it will?" he demanded. "Your beautiful hair! It used to be below your waist! But go on, go on! Oh, and to think that I was shut up here!" he groaned.

She was silent a moment, as if recalling the scene.

"The man—Captain Warner—was angry, and fenced badly. He could fence, but he thought he could finish it at once, and wanted to force the sword out of my hand—as you used to do."

"Yes, yes, I understand!"

She gazed before her at the moon. "And he got angrier when he found he could not, and he tried to run in over my guard; but I remembered that trick you taught me, and glided over his sword—over the left side, you know, Denis; and I put my sword point into him"—she did not shudder, though she paused a moment—"and he staggered—just like a big bull, and his sword fell. So I think he was hurt. The other man, Foyle—told me to send some one to help him. I met Donovan, the stableman, and sent him to the house."

Denis's eyes were chained to her face—his breath coming and going swiftly.

"You—you—brave girl! You dear girl! God, I can't realise it! But it was wrong—wrong; do you hear, Nora?"

"Wrong? Why?" she asked. "Would you have had them go away laughing, and saying you were afraid, Denis?"

"Yes, a thousand times, yes!" he responded, vehemently. "I would rather have been branded as a coward before all the world than that you should have run such a dreadful risk! Think of it! You might have been wounded—killed!" A

shudder shook him. "What should I have done then? I should have gone mad! If he had hurt you! I would have killed him, Nora—killed him!"

Her eyes were lifted for a moment to his—a moment only, and there was a strange look in them. He gazed at her with distended pupils, as if he did not see her.

"You brave girl! Was ever such a thing done by woman before? To fight for me—to save my honour at the risk of your life!"

His eyes travelled over her face, and the sense of her supreme loveliness, joining with that other sense of all she had done for him, caused something in the very centre of his heart to throb. It beat and throbbed so that he could scarcely breathe; and he trembled with a new sensation which was half delight, half pain.

It seemed to him, as he gazed at her, as if he had seen her for the first time that night. She was not "little Nora," his old playmate, but a new creature. A child no longer, but a woman whose beauty, too wonderful for words, sent the blood rushing through his veins, and made his heart leap with new pulsations.

Now, incredible as it may seem, Denis, though he had reached the age of manhood, was a boy still in all that pertains to man's passion for woman. He had met many a fair girl in London, not a few of whom had regarded him with the glances of feminine admiration; but his heart had not been stirred—his senses had remained dormant. His heart was beating painfully now, something new and strange had sprung up within him. He could not speak for the stress and strain of this new emotion, and he clung to the bars with both hands, as if he were giddy, and, floating away from his very self, required something tangible to cling to. Then his hand stole from the bar to her arm.

"Nora," he breathed, "I—I do not know what to say to you! How to thank you! My brain's in a whirl. I can only picture you lying on the grass with"—he shuddered—"a sword—thrust through your breast! And you did it for me—for me! Ah!" He drew a long breath.

"Why not?" she said; and her voice, low and clear, was music itself. "Wouldn't you have done it for me?"

"Yes, yes, of course!"

"Well, then," she responded, "did you stop to think when you plunged into the lake for me this afternoon, Denis?"

"No; but that is different."

"How different?" she asked, with a faint smile.

"I am a man—you are—"

"Only a girl," she said, very quietly, "but a girl isn't always a coward. And she doesn't forget!"

"But you might have been wounded—killed!" Once more the awful vision of her lying dead rose before him.

"Why not?" she said. "But there was no fear—I knew that directly he began. You taught me too well, Denis. You taught me everything. After all, really, it was you who fought and won!"

At this example of woman's grand unselfishness and generosity, a great wave seemed to flood Denis's soul. He put his arm round her, and drew her as near to him as he could. Alas! the bars were between them; and he longed to tear them from their sockets!

She tried to draw away from him, but she was powerless in his strong grasp, and had no room for struggling on the narrow ledge.

"Nora," he said, and his voice was almost a whisper—"Nora—" Then he stopped. It is not always that the lips can speak from a full heart—sometimes it is too full. "Nora! Dearest! Nora, how—how beautiful you are! Beautiful and brave! There was never, since the world began, any girl like you! Turn your face to me, Nora!"

She would have refused, but his words, his voice, held her in thrall. He, too, seemed as strange to her as she to him. He was her prince, her hero, her god. She had waited for the return of her old playmate—the boy, and, lo! a Man, perfect, supreme, a king, had come back to her. Her hand closed tightly on the bar to prevent her falling, for her senses swam, as the sunlight swims and is swallowed up in the sea.

"Beautiful!" he breathed, almost unconsciously. His other hand went to her hair, caressingly. "How soft your hair is! You look like a boy—but too lovely, Nora! Hold by your other hand, and give me the one you fought with for me!" She obeyed, and he took her hand and drew her arm round his neck. At its warm contact, a thrill ran through him, and he bent his head until his lips touched her arm.

She caught it back, with a faint, inarticulate cry, as if the touch of his lips—reverent, worshipping—had hurt her.

"You—you are not angry?" he pleaded. "Don't take your arm away, if you are not. Nora, my heart is aching with the longing to tell you what—what I think of you, to thank you! To have saved my honour! My brave Nora! And I am keeping you here!" He was struck with remorse at the thought. "And you are tired—!"

She did not speak, but she did not withdraw her arm. She was looking, not at him, but at the starlit sky. Her heart was aching, too, with a strange, subtle aching; but, mingled with the pain, was as strange and subtle a happiness. She was too innocent to know anything of passion—was too innocent even to know that this which was throbbing through her veins was love. She only knew that she could not take her arm from him, could do nothing but obey. Love acknowledged its lord and master.

"Your lashes are darker than your hair, Nora," he said, almost to himself; "they are black. How long they have grown since—since I saw you last. Do you remember how we used to play at blind-man's buff, down by the lake? I can remember tying the handkerchief round your eyes. They are violet—quite violet!" he said, irrelevantly. "I have never seen anything like them. Nora, none of the women in London were as beautiful as you are!"

Her heart leapt at his praise. She had never thought of her looks—never asked herself whether she was beautiful or plain. What did it matter? But she was glad now—glad, glad!

"I never thought that you would grow to—to this!" he went on, in a murmur which was just audible. "It is like coming home to a stranger. Nora, speak my name, or I shall think that you are indeed some one else!"

It was a moment or two before she could rise from the depths and find her voice. Then she murmured:

"Denis!"

Not in the thin treble by which most women voice their emotion, but in a deep contralto, which, though she knew it not, was the perfect music of passion.

"Again!" he pleaded.

But she shook her head. As she did so, he felt something warm trickle on to his neck. He put up his hand, and touched the place, and, looking at his hand, he saw that it was stained with blood!

He did not start or utter an exclamation. But he looked at her with horror, pity, remorse in his eyes.

"Nora," he said, quietly enough, but with all his aching soul in his voice, "you *are* hurt—wounded!"

Her eyes fell before the storm in his.

"It—it is nothing," she said.

"You are bleeding!" he panted—"bleeding! Let me see! Let me see! I will!" She had tried to take her arm away, but he caught it, and drew back the sleeve. It would not go



far enough, and he caught up the sword and slit the linen, and so bared the white loveliness of her arm, stained crimson just below the shoulder. His eyes were chained to it with a kind of fascination, and he was stricken dumb for a minute or two. Then a groan burst from his lips.

"Oh, Nora! my darling, my dearest! And for me—for me! Wait there. Do not move, I command you! You hear, I command you!"

She had intended slipping from the buttress to the ivy, and leaving him; but when her heart's lord commanded she stayed.

He rushed to the washstand, and caught up a sponge, dipped it in the water, and, returning to her, tenderly—how tenderly!—washed the wound.

She suffered him to do it, her eyes, half-closed, dwelling on his face—now that he was not looking at her. Every touch of his loving fingers thrilled through her. She seemed to herself like a thief—to have stolen such joy for so slight an act. Why, to have him look at her, tend her, like this, she would willingly have been thrust through the heart!

"It is nothing!" she said, in a faint voice. "It was the point only touched me. I did not feel it—scarcely. I had forgotten it. Do not trouble, Denis!"

She sang his name, though almost inaudibly.

"Nothing! This cruel cut! And your beautiful arm—how white it is! Like—like marble!" He laid it against his cheek, and kissed it. Then he put his arm round her, and drew her so that her face was on a level with his, and gazed into her eyes.

The moon had got round to them, and looked down on them—with the bland, pitiless impassivity which has gazed on how many such love scenes!—as their souls, naked in each other's sight, communed with each other, like kindred spirits meeting for the first time.

"Nora!" he breathed, "I—love you! Yes, I love you!"

She did not speak. Her eyes dwelt on his, bathed in the pure passion which flooded them.

"I love you—dearest! Do you hear? Do you understand? I love you, Nora, my brave, sweet Nora! Come nearer to me. Oh! these bars!" He shut his teeth sharply. "Bend your head closer, dear! I love you! Nora, do you love me—a little? Speak to me; tell me, dearest!"

How could she speak, when the beating of her heart, the exquisite joy, robbed her of all power of speech?

"Nora, I know now! God, how blind I have been! I thought that I was only glad to get back to my old playmate

—‘my little Nora!’ But it was because I loved you, that I thought of you—dreamt of you every night! And now I have come back and found a beautiful woman—an angel from Heaven, in the place of the little girl I knew! And you have risked your life, just to save my honour!—have shed your blood for me! Nora, I tell you, I love you! I shall love you all my life! And no one but you. Speak to me! Whisper! Say that you love me, dearest, or—or— Ah! I could not bear it if you did not!”

She tried to resist, but the words came, even as she tried to silence them.

“I love you, Denis!” she said, in the deep contralto, clear and soft as a strain of music.

His arm tightened round her.

“You love me! Oh, how strange! how—how wonderful that sounds! but, Nora, my darling, how sweet! You—love me! Why, I wonder? Oh, I wonder! These bars! Couldn’t you—ah, try to come a little nearer!”

She came a little closer to him; and heart beat against heart. He drew her face up to his, and, holding it so for a moment, looked into her eyes. Then he kissed her on the lips—love’s sacramental kiss.

“My love—my wife!” he murmured, “for you will be my wife!”

She started, and moved uneasily in his embrace.

“Yes, Nora, you will be my wife! I shall never love any other woman. I will never marry any one else. You must wait for me, Nora! Say it, say it! Say, ‘I will be your wife, Denis! I will never marry any other than you!’”

She looked at him, her eyes dwelling on him.

“I—will never marry any other than you, Denis!” she breathed.

“Swear to me! You are so beautiful, so lovely, so sweet, that—that I can scarcely believe—that— Swear to me! No! Give me, of your own free will, one kiss. Then I shall know—believe!”

Her lips had never met any other than her mother’s, and all her maidenly instinct—that half-fierce reluctance which is born with every true woman—rose and fought against his command.

“Nora!” he pleaded, commanded.

She raised her drooping head, and, with half-closed eyes, pressed her tremulous lips to his.

“Let me go! Ah, Denis!” she panted, as he drew her to him.

"Ah, how can I?" he breathed, chokingly. He pressed his forehead against the cold iron. "How can I let you go when you will take my life, my heart, with you? Nora, my—wife! I love you!"

As he breathed the words which, while one woman and one man live upon it, will echo through the earth, footsteps came clattering up the stone passage. They did not hear it—they heard nothing but each other's swift, short breathing—but the knocking at the door which followed the footsteps reached even them.

She drew her arms from him—they had, of their own accord, been twined round his neck, and her head was upon his bosom—and stepped back.

"Some one!" she whispered, calmly, not affrightedly.

"Oh, be careful how you go, my dearest! Remember, you are mine, mine forever!" he whispered back.

He stood leaning out and watching her until she had reached the ground. Then she paused, and looked up at him for a moment; a look in which her love expressed itself even more eloquently than it had hitherto done; then she was lost in the shadows.

The knocking still continued at the door, and Denis went and opened it.

Cronin fell in—he had been leaning against it—and, stumbling to his feet, gasped:

"Master Denis, Master Denis! For God's sake, fly! How did you get out—how?"

His eyes, round with terror and excitement, fell upon the sword; and Denis caught it up.

"How did you get out? Fly, Mr. Denis; he's hurt, badly hurt!—mortal, I fear! Get off at once. There's a horse ready saddled! Oh, dear! oh, dear!"

Denis looked at the flurried man dreamily. If it will be believed, he had almost forgotten the duel! Nora's kiss was still on his lips, her arms still round his neck, the subtle magic of her presence enfolded him.

"Oh, for the Lord's sake, don't stand there like that, Master Denis!" cried the butler, in a frenzied whisper. "There's no time to lose! Fly, sir, fly! The horse!"

Denis began to realise.

"All right, Cronin," he said, with a smile, as he wiped the sword on his shirt-sleeve. "Badly hurt, is he? I thought he might be. Didn't know I had a second key, did you?"

"I thought you had!" said Cronin. "The Earl might

have guessed he wouldn't keep you in bounds when mischief was afoot. But, come now, Mr. Denis!" he implored.

Denis shook his head.

"No running away for me, thank you, Cronin," he said. "But I'm coming down, tell the Earl." And, pushing the old man in front of him, he followed him down the passage.

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## CHAPTER VI.

THERE was an air of suppressed excitement and anxiety about the great house; servants were hurrying to and fro in a confused and purposeless fashion; lights were flashing and flickering in the hall and corridors. At the entrance to the hall, Denis laid his hand on Cronin's shoulder and stopped him.

"Is he very bad, Cronin?" he asked. It would be as well to learn as much as he could, so that he might play his part—or, rather, continue Nora's.

"Bad! Sure, and the man's struck mortal, I'm afraid, Mr. Denis!" said the butler, shaking his head solemnly; but there was a twinkle of satisfaction in his eye. An Irishman dearly loves a fight, and at this moment—anxious as he was—Cronin was full of pride in his young master. That Mr. Denis should fight, was a matter of course, but it was wonderful that he should have made "the English Captain" lick the dust. "What did you go to run the poor gentleman through for? Why didn't you just pink him through the sword arm? Ah, but it's a mighty pretty fencer you are, Mr. Denis, and I'm proud—ashamed—of ye, I mane, that I am! In your own house, too! Where did you get that thrust from, Mr. Denis, dear? I once see Lord Patrick give just such another when he and the Earl of Cromarty were fighting in Dublin!"

"And he is very badly hurt?" asked Denis, dodging the question.

"Bad, indade, sir!" said Cronin. "Donovan's ridden off for the doctor; and, meanwhile, the other gentleman's attending him. And the Lord's helping. Ah, Mr. Denis, I'm afraid there'll be the devil to pay betwixt you and your uncle! If you'd take my advice, you'd show 'em all a pair of clean heels, and get back to London till the affair's blown over a wee bit."

"Where have they taken him?" asked Denis.

"Into the Earl's own room; and there he is looking like a bled calf. If you'd only go away—there's plenty of time!"

Denis shook his head, and passed into the library.

"Tell my uncle I am here," he said. He paced up and down, trying to think the matter out calmly; but it was difficult. His heart and mind were full of Nora, of the strange and wonderful love for her that had sprung up within his soul. He was still, so to speak, intoxicated with her beauty, the charm of her pure girlhood, the touch of her lips, the music of her voice.

And this wondrous creature, all loveliness and sweetness and noble courage, had actually risked her life to save his honour! He was so absorbed by Nora, that he gave no thought to his own danger, did not reflect that in these "degenerate days" to kill a man is counted murder, though you met him in fair fight and with equal weapons.

The door opened, and Cronin stole in.

"The Earl's sent for you, Mr. Denis!" he said in a hushed voice. "Shall I say I can't find you nowhere?"

"No, no; I am coming," said Denis; and he followed the reluctant Cronin to the Earl's bedroom. It was a vast apartment, with the huge and cumbersome furniture which still lingers in such out-of-the-way parts of Ireland. Half a dozen generations of Dennisons had given up the ghost in the gigantic, carved bed on which Warner lay stretched.

The room was so large that the three or four candles barely sufficed to lighten it; and the figures of the Earl and Spencer Foyle threw grotesque shadows on the old walls. Denis stood just inside the room, and the Earl glanced at him sternly.

"Look at your work, sir!" he said, in a low voice, shaking with anger.

Denis advanced to the bed, and looked down at Warner. The man was very white, there was a pinched expression about his lips, and his brows were knit. Denis could have pitied him—but he remembered the insult he had put upon Nora, the wound he had inflicted on the white arm, and it is to be feared that there was no room for pity for Warner; it all went, naturally, to Nora.

Spencer Foyle had seen him enter, and had watched him with a sidelong look. Now he spoke.

"Captain Warner wished to see you, Mr. Dennison," he said.

Denis inclined his head.

"I have come," he said, in true Irish fashion.

At the sound of his voice, Warner opened his eyes. The man was a tipsy fool, but he had the instincts of a gentleman.

"Is that—Mr. Dennison?" he asked, in a faint voice.

"Yes," said Spencer Foyle, and he looked from one to the other watchfully. "You wished to see him, to speak to him?"

Warner nodded, and tried to rise on his elbow, but fell back.

"I wanted to say—" he began, then he paused, and stared confusedly at Denis. "That's not him—not the young fellow!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, it is. It is Mr. Dennison," said Foyle.

Denis's heart beat apprehensively, but he said nothing.

"No, it is not!" said Warner, obstinately.

"Speak to him," said Foyle. "He is scarcely quite conscious yet."

"I'm conscious enough," said Warner, with feeble impatience. "I say it is not the young fellow who fought with me! Look at his eyes!"

"Speak to him," said Foyle, in a low voice.

"I am Denis Dennison," said Denis, in his clear tones.

Warner passed his hand over his eyes. "It's strange!" he muttered. "You—you don't look the same—somehow. It—it was the moonlight that made you look different, I suppose. I wanted to speak to you—before these others."

Denis inclined his head.

"I wanted to say that—take this confounded thing off my head, Foyle!" he broke off, fumbling at the wet cloth on his forehead, and flinging it aside. "I wanted to say that—that—it was my fault. What I mean is, that—that—it was a fair fight. You—you played the game according to the rules, and—quite straight. It was just a chance that I didn't run you through, instead of you running me."

Denis flushed. He had not expected such generosity from this man, and he was about to exclaim, "I am sorry, Captain Warner," when, unfortunately, Warner, like men of his breed, kicked over the pail of milk by saying:

"A piece of infernal folly! And all—over a girl who is pretty certain to be no better than she should be, and—and—not worth two gentlemen fighting about."

Denis's face went white, and his eyes flashed, and he was about to retort indignantly, when Spencer Foyle, with a cynical smile, held up his hand.

"You exonerate Mr. Dennison from all blame, Warner?" he said, in his low voice.

"Of course—of course!" said Warner. "If I'm done for, don't let him be troubled; but if I pull through—well—perhaps, some day, I shall have a chance of paying him back."

Denis's heart was hardened again.

"I trust you will pull through, Captain Warner," he said, grimly.

The Earl looked up fiercely.

"Is that all you have to say, sir?" he demanded. "You owe Captain Warner an apology. Offer it!"

Denis's Irish blood grew hot, but he remembered the wounded man, and restrained himself.

"If Captain Warner will take back what he said about—Nora, I will apologise for throwing the wine," he said, quietly.

Warner flushed angrily, and he tried to rise again, but Foyle prevented him.

"Leave the room, sir!" commanded the Earl, in a voice of steel.

Denis paused a moment.

"I shall be in the house—if I am wanted," he said, as quietly as before; and then he left the room, and went down to the library.

Half an hour afterwards the doctor thundered up on horseback. He was an old man, old enough to remember and to have taken part in similar encounters, and he made his examination with the cool self-confidence of the accomplished and practical surgeon. Then he looked round, and nodded cheerfully.

"All right," he said, brusquely. "He'll pull through. It's a clean wound, and in a good place—that is, it might have been in a worse, eh, Captain Warner? It will be a lesson to you, sir, to be careful when you are walking about with a carving-knife." He had, of course, heard the story of the quarrel from Donovan. "Caught your leg on the edge of the carpet, and ran the point of the knife into you, I understand?"

Warner nodded glumly.

"That's it," he said, sullenly.

"Quite so," said the doctor. "Anybody else happen to be near—ahem!—and injured?"

"No one else," said Foyle, with a cynical smile of approval at the doctor's way of putting it.

"That's all right! Sometimes it happens that some one else gets—hurt. Not so in this case? Very good. Now, then, I'll just put this straight, and give Captain Warner a sleeping draught, and in a day or two—eh? Nasty thing to walk about with—a carving-knife!"

Denis paced up and down the library, or on the terrace, for hours—days, the time seemed to him, until he heard the doctor come down the stairs. The old man had brought

Denis into the world, and was fond of him—as who was not?—and he met him at the library door, and drew him in, closing the door after them.

“You young devil!” he said, with a serio-comic sternness.

“Will he die?” asked Denis, gravely.

“Will he die?” echoed Dr. Reilly, mocking Denis’s voice.

“No, he won’t; but it’s no fault of yours. God help these Dennisons, they’re always spoiling for a fight! And only a Dennison would think of fighting a duel with swords, in the good—foolish—old way! But, by George! Denis, my lad, it might have been mighty serious! As it is, there’ll be trouble with the Earl. He’s in one of his black fits, and you’ll need be careful. Is there anything to drink—or did you consume it all before you fell to cold steel last night? Get me a drink, Denis, my lad.”

Denis fetched some whisky from the dining-room, which the servants, in their excitement, had not attempted to clear, and the doctor drank, with appreciation, as he continued:

“And so you’ve made a mess of it in London, and come back to the old place, without any wool, eh, Denis?”

Denis nodded.

“Ah, well! it is as I told the Earl it would be. To think of sending a Dennison to learn law! Devil a bit of law have any of them held by since the beginning of them! But, Denis, you’d better keep out of the way for a bit. Make yourself scarce till the black fit’s over, for there’s no saying what he may do or say while it’s on him. You and I know him of old, eh, Denis?”

Denis remained silent.

“And who was the girl you were quarrelling over?” asked the doctor, as he helped himself to another glass of the whisky, which was so old that it probably contained less spirit than an ordinary sherry.

Denis flushed, and the doctor laughed.

“No telling tales out of school, eh? Ah, well! Speaking of girls, Denis, there was one talking to me of you yesterday, and a beautiful one, too. Now, see here, why not go up to Esdaile House, and stay a bit? There’s one—and her name’s Lady Blanche—will be glad enough to see you. Eh, Denis, eh?”

Denis frowned slightly.

“She told me you were coming home, and will be expecting a visit. Now, why not go there till the storm blows over, and the Earl’s cooled down? Think it over—or, better still, ride back with me!”



Denis shook his head.

"I will wait here," he said. "I can't run away," and he smiled.

"You'd be the first Dennison that ever did!" said the doctor. "Well, well! But go to the Esdailes, Denis. They'll be glad to see you. Lord! what a beautiful girl her young ladyship's grown to! Well, I'll go up and see how my patient—devil a bit of patience there is about him!—is getting on;" and, with a nod, he left the room.

The morning glided on. Cronin came and told Denis, in a whisper, that breakfast was ready, and he went into the morning-room, and tried to eat. But he had no appetite, and could only drink a cup of coffee. He was not thinking of the wounded man, or of his uncle's anger, but of Nora. Love's fever was running through his veins like fire, and his only desire was to be with her, to hear her voice, touch her again.

He could not sit down, and, as he was standing at the window, his coffee cup in his hand, the Earl entered. He had not been to bed, but he had had his bath, and exchanged his evening-dress for a morning-suit. But he had not changed his mind towards his nephew, and the "black fit" proclaimed itself in his stern face and fierce eyes—in his very bearing.

Dr. Reilly often said that the Dennisons lived in a passion. It was sometimes that of love, sometimes that of hate, of laughter, or of anger, but it was always a passion.

Now, Lord Larry was not in a rage because his nephew had nearly done a man to death. By no means. If the quarrel had occurred in another house, and the two had fought in another place, the Earl would not have had a word of blame for Denis. He would, on the contrary, have been proud of him, shielded him, and supported him, even by fighting another duel on his behalf, if need were. But his anger and fury were caused by the fact that Denis had insulted Warner under the Earl's—and Denis's future—roof, and had fought with him "within the precincts."

To understand the old Lord's anger, one must know Ireland—not the Ireland of the cities, Dublin, Cork, and the rest, but the old-world Ireland of the remote parts. In these out-of-the-way spots hospitality is a sacred thing—absolutely sacred. It is Arabian in its thoroughness. If a man has become your guest, eaten of your salt and broken your bread, you may not touch a hair of his head, though he should be the greatest villain unhung, and your bitterest foe.

It is hard for Englishmen, especially the modern English-

man, to understand. But there it is: a solid, solemn fact. To this day there are Irishmen who will ruin themselves rather than give up keeping an open house; who regard a guest as an angel *not* entertained unawares, and who resent an insult offered to a man sheltered beneath their roof as an insult offered to themselves, however much in the wrong the insulted party may be. It is hard to understand; but there it is.

Denis drew himself up as the Earl entered, and bowed—as he had been taught to bow when an elder entered the room.

“So, sir,” said the Earl, “you are here. What have you to say for yourself?”

Now, this is a question difficult to answer off-hand. So few of us have anything to say for ourselves when it comes to the point. Denis only remained silent. But his silence, wise as it may have been, did not turn away the Earl’s wrath.

“You have insulted a guest beneath my roof,” he went on. “Beneath my roof! Not content with that, you have nearly killed him.”

At this Denis retorted unwisely:

“Dr. Reilly says he will recover.”

The Earl grew black.

“No thanks to you, sir! You intended to kill him. His friend, Mr. Foyle, says you struck for his heart, and if the man had not swerved you would have killed him. I don’t complain of that.”

“What do you complain of?” asked Denis, quietly.

“That he was my guest, sir!” said the Earl, passionately.

“Of your refusal to apologise to him—even now. You refused—refused, sir!”

Denis’s nostrils—they were as finely cut as a Greek statue’s, and very expressive—expanded.

“I would have apol—I would have said I was sorry, if he had not insulted her again,” he said.

The Earl showed his teeth, like a hound just about to bite.

“What has that to do with it?” he demanded. “The man was my guest. As to the girl—”

“Stop!” said Denis, growing white about the lips. “Don’t—don’t say a word against Nora, sir! She is blameless. If—if you knew—”

The Earl clenched his teeth.

“A common fisher-girl!” he stormed. “A nobody—knows—who!”

The whiteness spread from Denis’s lips to his whole face.

“Stop, sir! Nora is—”

"I don't care who she is! You have quarrelled, fought, with my guest. Will you apologise?"

"No!" said Denis. The "black fit" was not confined to the Earl, evidently. "Captain Warner insulted her in the first instance—"

"Spare me your cursed law terms!" broke in the Earl.

"—And I acted for her," went on Denis, disregarding the interruption. "We—I—she—we fought, and—there's an end of it."

"It is not ended," said the Earl. "Sit down and write an apology to Captain Warner—sit down at once, sir!" and he pointed to the writing-table which stood between the two windows.

"I will not!" said Denis.

"Sit down and write, sir!" repeated the Earl, in a voice like suppressed thunder.

Again the vision of Nora pursued by Warner and forced into the lake, of Nora fighting for his—Denis's—honour, rose before him.

"I will not!" he said; and he passed the Earl and walked into the hall.

The Earl followed him. Denis caught up his hat from the stand, with the intention of getting beyond his uncle's maddening fury. Out in the open air, he could think, command himself. But the Earl would not permit him to escape thus.

"You refuse! My guest! My guest! Beneath my roof!"

Denis turned to him, as if appealing to reason.

"How can I apologise? I will not!"

The Earl raised his hand.

"You will not? Then leave this house sir; and never dare to enter it again while I am master!" he said.

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## CHAPTER VII.

"LEAVE this house, sir; and never dare to enter it again while I am master!"

These were terrible words, rendered all the more terrible by the voice and aspect of the passionate old man.

Denis turned white for a moment, then the blood rushed to his face, and he drew himself up, and his eyes flashed back wrath for wrath. His Irish blood was "up," and if the Earl had there and then relented and begged him to stay, Denis would not have done so.

He said no word, did not retort as an Englishman would have done, but inclined his head slightly, and instantly turned

and walked out of the house, down the steps and through the avenue.

At the end he paused and looked back. He had the affectionate disposition of his race, and was fond of the old man and of the old house. At that moment it seemed as if he were leaving a part of himself behind; and the wrench of separation was painful.

He had spent nearly all his life at Marishannon; there was not a tree he did not know, not a fence or a brook that he had not ridden over; the dogs and horses were his intimate friends; the servants, from Cronin downwards, were devoted to him; he knew that there would be weeping and wailing in the servants' hall, where the scene of his dismissal was now being discussed. And to be turned out like—like a beggar! No, not like a beggar; for no beggar was ever turned away from Marishannon Hall.

His heart ached, and his eyes grew dim; and, to add to his misery, his favourite pointer bitch came bounding after him and leaped up to lick his hand. It was hard work to send her back, for she seemed to know that there was trouble afoot, and that he was in distress; and he had to drive her back with a harsh, choking voice before she would leave him.

As she slunk away, with many a loving, reproachful look back at him, he heard footsteps, which he knew were Cronin's, hurrying down the avenue, and the old butler's voice crying:

"Master Denis, come back! For the love of Heaven! come back, Master Denis!"

Dreading a scene with the old man, Denis hid behind a tree, and waited until Cronin turned, and, wringing his hands, followed the dog.

Then Denis went on his way, passed through the half-ruined gate and on to the road: a wanderer in the land.

He went up the road, and entering the wicket-gate leading to the cottage, went, not to the cottage, but to the strip of beach beside the lake. Something told him that Nora would be there. She had been sitting on a jutting piece of rock under the hill, and she heard his footsteps, and rose as he came, with a lover's quickness, towards her. She rose, but stood quite still, her eyes lowered, her lips tremulous.

The sunlight streamed down upon her, dancing on the soft, dark-brown hair, and resting lovingly upon the beautiful face; and to Denis she looked like a vision of summer—summer ere the heat has robbed it of its freshness or dimmed its brightness.

"Nora!" he said; and he took her in his arms—not vio-

lently, but with the reverence of true love, the half fearful-ness of a man for a woman—and kissed her.

She suffered him for a moment, then put his arms from her, gently and lingeringly.

"The man—Warner—is all right," he said. "I saw the old doctor last night, and he says that he will get better."

"I am glad," she said. "I thought I had killed him."

"It would have been no more than he deserved," he said, with a flash of the eyes. Then he paused for a moment. How was he to tell her that he was going, without awakening her suspicions of his disgrace and banishment? He looked aside, away from the wonderful eyes resting on him. "It will be better for me to go away for a time, Nora," he said.

She moved slightly, and did not speak; but he saw her lips quiver.

"I *must* go, Nora! And—and I am going at once. I have come to say—good-bye." He got her hand and held it tightly. "Come and sit down beside me—we shall not be together long." He drew her to the boulder and put his arm round her. "I am going to London, and—and then on somewhere. I don't quite know where. You see, I have failed at the law, and I must try something else. There must be something that even a Dennison can do!" He laughed rather ruefully. "I will write to you, dearest. And—and—ah, Nora, you will not forget me!"

It is always the lover's cry: "Dinna forget!" She turned her eyes upon him with a glance that made his heart leap.

"That was an unworthy request, dearest!" he said, penitently. "I know you will not forget. You have said—you told me last night that you loved me, Nora! And you will not take your love from me, though—though you may not see me again for a very long time, perhaps. You will love me always, Nora?"

"Yes," she said, in a low voice. "I shall always love you, Denis."

"And some day—who knows how soon!—when I have made a fortune, when I have got enough money to make a nest for you, you will be my wife. Think of it, Nora!" He drew her head down to his breast and kissed the glossy hair.

Her hand trembled in his, clung to it, against her will; then she drew her head from its pillow and looked up at him.

"Denis, I can never be your wife," she said.

"What?" he exclaimed, as if he did not comprehend. "Never!" He gazed at her for a moment, then smiled.

"Never is a long time, Nora. Why do you say such a thing? It—it cuts like a knife."

"Because I must," she said, withdrawing her hand and clasping it tightly as she looked before her. "Listen, Denis: I—I was mad last night to let you say what you did, to tell you that I—I loved you, and—and let you promise to marry me. I have been thinking of it ever since, and—and I know that it can never be."

"Why not?" he demanded.

"Because you are Denis Dennison, the Earl's nephew, the future master of the Hall, and I am Nora Neil—a nobody," she said, in a low voice, but a firm one. "Ah, don't speak! Don't make it harder for me, Denis—dear!" The exquisite love and pleading in the "dear" kept him silent, and after a pause she went on. "I am only an ignorant girl, Denis; but I know just enough to know the difference between us. We are like the eagle upon the mount there and—and the crow in the field. Eagles don't mate with crows, and I—I am the crow, Denis. Hush!" for he had opened his lips to pour forth a passionate denial. "If you married me, the Earl would never speak to you, see you again. All the county people, your friends, Denis, would have nothing to say to me, would shun you. It would be your ruin. I am not so ignorant as not to know that. Has ever a Dennison, or an Esdaile, married a peasant girl? You know they haven't, Denis; and—and you must not do it."

He held himself in restraint; he was wise enough to know that no assertion, however passionate, would avail with her; and so he said, calmly and quietly, instead of vehemently:

"Look here, Nora; I want to answer you, argue with you, and so I won't say what I was going to say at first—that it was all nonsense. I know the Earl wouldn't be pleased; I dare say there'd be some kind of fuss and talk amongst the Esdailes and the Creaghs, and the rest of them; but—well, a man can marry whom he likes."

"Not a Dennison," she said, in a low voice.

"Ah, yes, he can," he said. "Why, the times are changing, and a man can marry a girl, though she may be—what the world calls below him in rank. It makes me mad to talk of your being below me, Nora, when I know that it's the other way about, and that you are every way above me."

She shook her head.

"Oh, yes, you are. See here, now, dearest; you mayn't be Lady Nora Neil, but just Nora of Marishannon, but you're different to the other girls in the place. I'm arguing, you

see, and so I put it plainly. You've been well taught, and you have the manners of a lady—how I hate to have to say all this!—and if you'd been the Earl's niece, my sister, or—*Lady Blanche*, you couldn't be a more perfect lady in everything—everything. And so that alters the whole case, don't you see!" he wound up triumphantly.

She shook her head again.

"I am not well taught, Denis. A village school! And if I were, I am still *Nora Neil*—"

"Whom every one looks up to," he broke in. "Why, *Nora*, you are a favourite of my uncle's; there is no one he likes so well. You have been my playmate—"

"Yes," she said, not bitterly but sadly, "your playmate, because there was no other. I was allowed to run about the Hall like—like—just like one of the dogs, so that you might not feel lonely and dull. Oh, I know—I know, Denis! And it is because of that, as well as the difference between us, that I—I say it can never be. I—I would not betray the Earl's trust in me. Wouldn't he say that I had taken advantage of his kindness to lead you astray and to ruin you? For he would think you were ruined in marrying me, and—he would be right, Denis. Besides—" She stopped, and her face went pale.

"Go on, *Nora*," he said. "Speak to me from your heart, dearest. I want to hear all you think. Why, I feel as if I could read all your thoughts. Only let me look into your eyes. What were you going to say, *Nora*?"

"Besides, there—there is something else. There—there is my father." Her voice grew almost inaudible at the word, and her lovely head drooped in humiliation. "I—I don't know who—what he is." The tears rose to her eyes, but she fought with them and forced them down. "He may be—they say—I have heard the girls in the school whisper things about him. Ah, no, no, Denis, I could not—could not do what you want!"

"Hold on!" he said, with restrained eagerness. "Grant all you say, hint at, what has he to do with you, *Nora*? It is very likely that you will never see him, hear of him. You have never heard from him—*Mrs. Neil*, I mean?"

"No; mother has never spoken of him."

"Very well! Then he may be—forgive me, *Nora*—he may be dead. Anyway, it is very improbable that he will ever come back. And if he should, I do not care. Great Heaven! it is no fault of yours, whatever he is, whatever he

has done! Are you—am I—ah, think of me a little, dearest!—to suffer because of him?”

“Yes,” she said, almost inaudibly; “I must suffer. And you—Denis, I—I prayed last night that you would go away at once, and—and learn to forget me. The first part of my prayer was answered; you are going. And—and you will forget me, Denis!” She held out her hand to him imploringly—an unwise thing to do, for he caught the small brown hand and pressed it to his heart.

“No,” he said, with a touch of the Dennison firmness, almost sternness, in his still boyish voice; “that is asking too much. It was a cruel prayer, Nora, and it will *not* be granted. I am going away, but I shall not forget you! I love you—do you hear, Nora?—with a love that will last through my life. Did you ever hear of a Dennison being fickle or faithless? We’re a bad lot, I’m afraid, but we stick to the woman who has won our heart. And you have won mine, Nora. It is yours—yours! You cannot take it out of your bosom and throw it aside. You can’t take back your love or your promise! Have you forgotten last night? You promised—”

“No,” she said. The colour stained her face and neck. “I—I told you that I loved you—” He caught her to him. Is there any man who could resist such words, uttered in a voice of music? “But, ah, Denis—let me go—let me go! I will not ruin you, I—love you—so—much—so much! Listen!—no, you shall not—kiss me. Never again—”

He laughed with loving defiance, and drew her face to his and held it against his lips.

“I am content with loving you, with knowing that you love me, Denis!” she breathed. “I will promise never to marry any one else; I promised that last night. And you must be content too. You will go away, and—and see some one else, some great lady fitted to be your wife—”

“Now you insult me, Nora!” he said.

She clung to him.

“Ah, don’t be angry with me—my love—my love!” she murmured, with an agony in her tones. “Not now we are just parting! Let—let me think of you, at this, our last moment, as kind—and gentle. Speak to me, Denis! Forgive me, and—and let me go!”

She slipped down until she knelt at his feet and gazed up at him, her hands clinging to his.

His face went white and his breath came with laboured pain. It was as if his heart were being racked; to see her at his feet,



to see her wonderful eyes glowing with love, to hear her pleading with him to let her go, to forgive her.

"I will not let you go!" he said, and his voice was hoarse with his emotion. "You ask too much! Do you know, understand, what you are to me? Life of my life, soul of my soul! I cannot tear you out of my heart, even if I wanted to. And I will not let you go! It is too late—too late, Nora! You have let me know that you love me, and—you belong to me! Yes, belong to me! I hold you to your promise. You will never love any other man, and you will wait for me. No, do not speak. It is for you to listen now. I am your husband in the sight of Heaven—you are my wife. I will come back for you, and I will claim you, wherever you are, whoever may stand between us. Forget you!" He raised his hand. "May God forget me the day I do so! No, come to me!" for she had shrunk back and covered her face with her hands. A vow is a solemn thing in Marishannon—whatever it may be in more civilised places. "Come to me—my own!" He raised her and strained her to him, kissing her lips, and eyes, and hair, then in an almost inarticulate voice he whispered: "Good-bye—good-bye, Nora—my wife!"

She held him a little way from her, gazing into his eyes with love's passion and love's agony; as if she could not help herself, she pressed her lips to his, and murmured "Denis!" and as he tore himself away, she flung herself down on the rock, her face buried in her extended arms.

Women can still love in this effete old world of ours.

Denis went rapidly up the hill, tearing through the little wood, his pulses throbbing, his heart aching; very much indeed like a man distraught. He dared not look behind him—if he had seen the girlish figure lying prone in its abandonment, he must assuredly have gone back—and with white face and set teeth he reached the gate. As he passed through it, a phaeton, driven by a young lady, came down the road towards him.

She was an extremely handsome girl, as fair as the heroine of Tennyson's well-known poem; with golden hair—not of the fluffy kind, but smooth, though soft—and eyes that are commonly called hazel, because, it is to be presumed, they are neither brown nor grey. She was almost beautiful, but there was a defect in her face—it may have been in the expression—which made it fall short of loveliness. The mouth was a trifle coarse, and there was a hint of animalism—if the word may be used—about the contour of the face, which, notwithstanding its drawbacks, possessed a hint of strength which was

more plainly indicated by the lower lines than elsewhere. In a word, it was a face full of character and self-will. If one added self-indulgence, the addition would not be too unjust.

As she drove along the rough road, her expression was moody and discontented, but at sight of Denis it changed instantly. The colour rose to her cheeks, her eyes lit up, and her rather full lips parted with a quick little gasp.

She glanced at the gate, closed her lips tightly, then, as, with a cut of the whip she sent the horse on, she overtook Denis, leant forward with a smile, and called to him.

He did not hear at first—Nora's voice still rang in his ears, you see—but at the second call he pulled up—none too willingly—and raised his hat.

"Why, Denis!" she exclaimed, "is it really you?"

Now, she knew that he had returned, and knew more than that.

"How do you do, Lady Blanche?" he responded, looking at her with some surprise. For other girls besides his Nora can alter pretty considerably in five years.

"I heard you had come back," she said. "Where are you going? Won't you get in?"

As he was going on the same road, he could not very well refuse, and he got into the phaeton beside her.

"Why, how you have—grown!" she exclaimed. "What a long time you have been away!" Her eyes dwelt on him rather boldly, but with a certain shyness, and the colour had mounted to her face.

"Five years," he said, with a smile, but with a confused air, for he was still throbbing and aching.

"And where were you going? To Esdaile, I hope," she continued. "What a long time it seems since we have all seen you!"

As she spoke, she drew the dust-cloth over his knees, and looked at him sideways; and her colour came and went.

It may as well be set down at once that, as a school-girl, Blanche Esdaile had been in love with the handsome Dennison boy, and the old girlish love revived with tenfold ardour in the presence of this handsome, graceful young fellow, the playmate transformed to that wonderful and mysterious being—a Man.

Denis hesitated.

"I should like to have come," he said, somewhat awkwardly, "but I am going to London, Lady Blanche."

She made a wry face.

"Why 'Lady' Blanche?" she said, with a laugh. "It used to be 'Blanche' and 'Denis' in the old time."

"But that is long ago," he said, mechanically, "and you have grown up into such a young lady—such a swell."

She smiled upon him.

"Do you think I have altered—improved—so much? Never mind; you must still call me Blanche. And I may call you—Denis?" she said, with a little lingering on his name.

"Why, yes, of course!" he said; "if you will be so kind. And how are Lord and Lady Esdaile?"

"Oh, very well," she replied, indifferently. "And how do you like London? Oh, how I long to see it!"

Her eyes expanded, and she drew the breath of desire.

Denis laughed.

"I didn't like London at all," he said. "It isn't bad in winter; in fact, it's just tolerable; but in summer—well, it's intolerable. The streets are dirty and the air choky; in fact, it's beastly."

"All the same, I wish I were there," she said. "I wanted to go over for the season, but father said he couldn't manage it; talked of the expense and the shortness of money; the usual cry: 'No rents and bad times.' All excuses, of course. And have you passed your examination? Are you a full-fledged barrister, Denis? I am not to say 'Mr.' Denis, am I?"

"No—plain Denis," he said, forcing a smile. "No, I have not passed; I have failed. That is why I am going away."

"Going away?" she echoed, with a note of disappointment in her full tones. "Not at once?"

"Yes, at once—to-day," he said, gravely. "I was on my way to catch the Barrigfyne coach when you caught me up."

She looked at him, not so much enquiringly as watchfully.

"Have you and the Earl quarrelled?" she asked.

Denis changed colour.

"Well, yes," he said.

"And are you going away, after being home only one night?" she said, softly. "I am sorry."

"Thank you," he responded; "it's very kind of you to say so."

"What did you quarrel about?" she asked; and he would have noticed, if he had not been so preoccupied, that the interrogative in her tone was only affected.

"Oh, all sorts of things," he said, evasively.

She drew her lips tight for a moment.

"But you have not quarrelled with us, Denis," she said, in

a soft, persuasive voice. "Why not come and stay at Esdaile for a little while? Father and mother would be glad to have you, and I—"

She did not finish the sentence, but turned her eyes upon him with an eloquence which few men would have been able to resist, unless they had been in love with, and just parted from, a Nora Neil.

"Thank you—thank you very much," said Denis; "but I must get to London as soon as possible."

"Where is your hurry?" she asked, uttering the Irish formula in her sweetest voice. "Come and stay with us for a few days—a few days only—Denis."

"I can't!" he said. "I must get on, and—and begin life as soon as possible. I may as well tell you, Lady—I mean Blanche—that I am turned out of the Hall, and that I have to make my own way in the world."

"My poor Denis!" she whispered. "But why should you? You must be master there some day—soon, perhaps."

Denis frowned. He was fond of his uncle, though the Earl had turned him out of house and home and doomed him to be a wanderer.

"I hope not," he said, gravely. "My uncle will, I trust, live for many a year."

"And meanwhile," she murmured, "come home with me, Denis. Make Esdaile your home till things come straight." He shook his head.

"I couldn't do that, Blanche," he said, seriously. "I must make my own way in the world, and the sooner I begin the better. Don't let me take you out of your way. I will get down at the cross-roads. I'm late already."

"Where had you been when I saw you?" she asked, with affected carelessness.

The colour rose to his face.

"Oh, to the beach," he said.

"Taking a last look at the lake, I suppose?" she said, easily. "But, Denis, I want you to come home with me!"

As she spoke, she laid her hand—it was shapely but large—on his arm, and pressed it.

"Come, just for a few days. You will not refuse me—Blanche!"

There was not another man within fifty miles who would have refrained from taking her hand and pressing it; but Denis simply ignored it.

"I'm sorry," he said; "I must get to London by this coach."

"You shall not," she said, with affected playfulness, but with a gleam of passion in her eyes, and an ordering tone in her voice. "You will come with me, Denis!"

"I cannot," he said. "I am very sorry. Here is my road. I will get down here and walk on to the cross-roads."

She let her hand slide down to his, and grasped it timidly, invitingly.

"Ah, come!" she whispered, her eyes full upon his.

Denis was stone to look or touch. Nora's lips still burned on his, her voice was still in his ears.

"I wish I could," he said, with affected eagerness, "but I can't. Good-bye, Blanche!" and leaping from the phaeton, he stood on the pathway for a moment with raised hat, then walked briskly on.

She sat bolt upright, her face pale, her lips tightly set—a woman worse than scorned; disregarded, ignored. Her breath came fast, her eyes flashed with passionate indignation and the bitterness of disappointment. Then suddenly the face grew scarlet, and with a cruel lash of the whip, she turned the horse and drove back the way she had come.

"It's that girl!" she muttered. "That girl!"

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## CHAPTER VIII.

LADY BLANCHE pulled up at the gate, got out of the phaeton, and tried to hitch the horse up to the rough paling; but the animal had been upset by her unsparing use of the whip, and it fidgeted restlessly.

At this moment, as she raised her hand to strike it across the face, Spencer Foyle came down the road. He glanced at her, paused, and then, raising his hat, said:

"Will you allow me to hold the horse for you?"

Lady Blanche eyed him haughtily; then, seeing that he was a gentleman, said, as pleasantly as her present temper would permit her:

"Thank you. I shall not be many minutes; but perhaps you cannot stay even so long? If I could tie the horse up—but he is in a bad temper."

Foyle smiled to himself, but he replied, blandly enough:

"I have all the day before me, and nothing to do in it. I will take care of the horse."

He looked at his cigarette-case as he spoke, as if to reassure her; and with another "Thank you," Lady Blanche went down the path towards the cottage.

As she did so, she glanced towards the beach and saw the

object of her thoughts lying face downwards. Lady Blanche's lips grew tightly together, and she stood and eyed the prostrate girl with a cruel intentness.

Presently, as if she felt the bold eyes fixed upon her, Nora raised her head, and rose. She stood for a moment as if still dazed and uncertain; then she was moving away, when Lady Blanche's full voice called to her.

"Nora Neil! I want you! Come up here!"

Nora hesitated a moment, then she came up the narrow path, fighting for the old calm self-possession as she did so.

Lady Blanche kept her eyes upon her pitilessly, as if she not only remarked the girl's pallor and distress, but enjoyed the spectacle.

"What are you doing down there?" she asked; and her tone and manner were full of the insolence with which an ill-bred person of superior position addresses an inferior.

Nora glanced at her and stood statuesque, rapidly regaining her composure.

"Nothing," she said.

Lady Blanche crimsoned.

"You forget yourself, Nora Neil," she said, haughtily. "You forget your manners. I am Lady Blanche; call me 'my lady' when you address me."

Nora looked straight before her.

"What do you want with me, my lady?" she asked.

"I want to speak to you," said Lady Blanche. "I want to know what you were doing up at the Hall last night?"

Nora did not start, but she turned her eyes upon the proud, handsome face enquiringly.

"At the Hall?" she said, not evasively, but as if she were recalling the fact.

"Don't repeat my words, please!" said Lady Blanche.

"It is of no use denying it."

"I have not denied anything," said Nora, quietly. "Why do you ask me?"

"I have my reasons," retorted Lady Blanche. "And you had better answer me, and truthfully."

"I do not lie," said Nora, calmly, and with a touch of contempt in her tone.

Lady Blanche crimsoned.

"You were up at the Hall last night—creeping about the terrace—listening. What were you there for? Oh, it is of no use looking at me like that. I know more than you think."

Nora glanced at her quickly, then lowered her eyes.

"You were seen crouching under the terrace wall—late at

night. I want to know what you were doing there; who were you spying on?"

Nora was still calm.

"Why should I tell you?" she replied. "It is no business of yours; it cannot concern you."

"Yes, but it does," retorted Lady Blanche. "You were spying about the house of my friends—the Dennisons."

"Then let the Earl ask me," said Nora.

Lady Blanche bit her lip.

"After all, I do not need an answer," she said. "I know very well why you were there. You went after Mr. Denis."

The coarseness of the assertion and the tone in which it was made would have befitted a peasant girl, but sounded strangely unsuited to one of Lady Blanche's position.

Nora's face flushed for a moment, and she opened her lips, then closed them again, and moved forward.

"Wait—stop!" commanded Lady Blanche.

Nora stopped, her face turned away, her eyes fixed before her.

"I know more than you think. Mr. Denis was here yesterday—here with you."

Nora raised her eyebrows faintly, and the slight gesture was as fuel to Lady Blanche's rage and jealousy.

"I'm told that you waited for him, waylaid him as he rode into Marishannon, and kept him here with you, when he ought to have been at the Hall. Is that true?"

"It is a lie!" said Nora, in her deep contralto. "I did not—waylay him. He came."

"Then you admit he *was* here with you?" said Lady Blanche, sharply; "and you kept him—away from his own people. And, not content with that, you followed him to the Hall!"

Nora raised her head, seemed about to speak, and again checked herself.

"And he has been here again this morning?" continued Lady Blanche. "Do you deny that?"

She had raised her voice unconsciously, and it had reached the sharp ears of Spencer Foyle. He got up from the bank where he had thrown himself, and looked downwards with a smile; then, after a moment, he said:

"I'll chance your running away, my friend. This is interesting." And he quietly and stealthily descended until, hidden by the trees, he could see the two girls and hear every word.

"I will not answer you, my lady," said Nora, with a self-

possession which contrasted finely and exasperatingly with Lady Blanche's suppressed excitement.

"There is no need. I know it. I saw him come through the gate!" she said, with a kind of malicious triumph. "Nora Neil, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

Nora started now; the blood rushed to her face, and her eyes flashed as she turned them on her persecutor.

"Ashamed!" she echoed, in a low voice.

"Yes, your conduct is shameful!" said Lady Blanche, in a lower voice. "And it is my duty, as—your superior, to tell you that you have behaved disgracefully."

Nora made another movement as if to avoid, not so much her assailant but her own rising passion, and Lady Blanche followed her. They had neared the cottage gradually, but neither of them noticed the wasted figure of Mrs. Neil standing at the door. She was leaning against the side, her face white and troubled, her hand pressed against her heart.

She, like Foyle, could hear every word.

"You are an ignorant girl, though an artful one," continued Lady Blanche, "and perhaps—though I doubt it—you don't know the consequences of running after a gentleman so much above you as Mr. Denis is. And it is my duty to warn you. I know more of the world than you do, and I tell you—"

Nora raised her hand, as if to shut out the voice.

"I do not want to hear!" she said. Then suddenly she swung round. "Leave me alone, my lady!"

"Not until you have promised better behaviour—and to leave Mr. Denis alone," retorted Lady Blanche. "Oh, I know what you would say: that he is an old friend and playmate, and that 'he meant nothing wrong.' That is the usual excuse of girls in your position. But Mr. Denis and you are too old to be 'playmates'—a sneer disfigured the full lips—"any longer. You are old enough to know that, Nora Neil. Give me your promise to leave him alone for the future, to have nothing to say to him, and—and I will overlook your conduct, shameful as it has been."

Nora's delicate nostrils dilated, and she breathed hard.

"Oh, why will you not go?" she said, almost to herself.

"If you refuse, I will go straight to the Earl and tell him what I know: that you lured Mr. Denis down here and kept him; that you followed him to the Hall last night, and enticed him here again this morning."

"Be silent!" said Nora, her lips quivering, every nerve on the rack in her endeavour at self-command.



Lady Blanche eyed her with malignant enjoyment of her distress.

"Perhaps you don't know—but I suspect you do—that the Earl and Mr. Denis have quarrelled about you—that Mr. Denis was foolish enough to fight a duel with the gentleman you were insolent to yesterday."

Nora went white, and pressed her hand to her bosom.

"Oh, you know it well enough," said Lady Blanche, with a sneer. "And I suppose you feel proud of your work—proud of driving a gentleman from his home?"

"It is not true," said Nora. She was panting for breath now, and there was pain and perplexity in her eyes in place of smothered rage and indignation.

"It is true," said Lady Blanche; "he and the Earl have quarrelled. Why should Mr. Denis be leaving Marishannon at a moment's notice, and directly after he has returned, if they had not quarrelled? And about you—a common girl not fit to be spoken to by a gentleman of Mr. Denis's position!"

Nora laid her hand upon the trunk of a tree, and stared before her vacantly. The importance of Lady Blanche's information had overwhelmed the insults with which it was accompanied. Denis had been turned out of the Hall, driven from home—and through her! She looked before her blindly, as if the world had suddenly become dark.

"What have you to say to that?" demanded Lady Blanche, mercilessly. "Little you care, I expect. Perhaps"—with a bitter sneer—"you have arranged to follow him."

She had gone a step too far. Nora turned swiftly, and stretching out her arm, seized Lady Blanche by the shoulder.

"Be silent!" she gasped. "How—how dare you! I follow him! I!"

Lady Blanche struggled under her grasp, firm as steel and as immovable as that of a vise.

"Take your hand off me, you insolent girl!" she cried. "Don't pollute me with your touch, you shameless—"

The figure that had been leaning tremblingly against the door came tottering towards them and stood between them.

"Nora—Lady Blanche!" gasped Mrs. Neil. "Take—take your hand away, Nora! Lady Blanche, you—you don't know what you say! For God's sake, be silent, and—and let her go!"

Nora's hand dropped, and Lady Blanche, white with passion, brushed her shoulder, as if to free it from defilement.

"Oh, it's you, Mrs. Neil?" she said. "You have come just in time. Perhaps *you'll* listen to reason and tell this girl

of yours that what I've said is for her warning, and that she'd better pay attention to it."

"For God's sake, don't say any more, my lady!" exclaimed Mrs. Neil, faintly, and clutching at her as if for support. "Don't say another word. Nora's a—a good girl! I know it! Don't speak—"

Lady Blanche sneered.

"A good girl!" she echoed, mocking Mrs. Neil's tone. "A good girl, indeed, to waylay a gentleman like Mr. Denis, to set a trap for him, and cause him to be driven from his own home! I warn you, Mrs. Neil, that you had better keep a close watch upon your 'good girl' before it is too late."

Nora uttered a low cry, the cry of one mortally wounded, and at the sound Mrs. Neil drew herself up, as if she had suddenly recovered her old strength.

"Silence!" she exclaimed. "You wrong her and yourself by such words, by such an accusation!"

"I—"

"Be silent, I say!" broke in the elder woman, with an air and tone of command which, coming from one so weak and ordinarily timid, was astounding. "You do not know what you are doing, who you are speaking to. For your own sake, say no more. Leave her—us—alone, and go your way!"

"For my sake!" retorted Lady Blanche, with haughty amazement. "What do you mean? You dare to threaten me—*me*? You must be mad, my good woman!"

Mrs. Neil's face was dyed a hectic flush, and her eyes flashed angrily. She opened her lips, as if about to retort passionately, then with a great effort she restrained herself.

"Go! Go, my lady!" she said, half-commandingly, half-pleadingly. "For God's sake, go! Don't anger her any more; don't—don't anger *me*! For your own sake—yes, for *yours*, Lady Blanche, leave us in peace!"

"I don't understand," said Lady Blanche, insolently; but something in the woman's eye, something Lady Blanche could not have defined to save her life, daunted her. Her bold eyes fell before the quiet, intent gaze which seemed to threaten while it implored. She bit her lips; then, after a moment or two of hesitation, with a shrug of her shoulder and an attempt at a sneer, said:

"Well, I have warned you both!" and she turned and went slowly up the path. When she reached the road, the gentleman who had so kindly taken charge of her horse was standing there still smoking his cigarette, and apparently half asleep.

"Oh, thank you," she said, trying to recover her composure, and smiled sweetly. "I am afraid I have kept you a very long time."

"Not at all," he said, politely. "Have you been to gather shells on the beach, or pay a visit to the cottage below? There is one hidden away round the cliff, is there not?"

"Yes," she said. "Oh, yes, I have been to see one of our sick people. Thanks again, very much!"

Foyle helped her in, gave her the reins, wrapped the elaborate dust-cloth carefully, and then raised his hat and smiled a pleasant adieu.

After she had gone he stood looking after her for a moment, and then leaned against the gate and reflected with half-closed eyes.

"That was the Esdaile crest on her carriage, and the young lady must be the Lady Blanche the Earl spoke of. A nice young lady. Something between a tigress and a—washer-woman. Now, how in the name of heredity can such persons as the Esdailes have contrived to possess so strange a mixture? The girl is scarcely a lady. . . . Pretty scene for a melodrama. I wonder what the woman meant by her 'For your own sake!' Really, for a 'one-hoss place,' Marishannon has an interesting amount of romance about it. 'For your own sake!' Strange kind of thing for a woman like that to say to the daughter of Lord Esdaile. Hem! At any rate, there can be no doubt that both the young women are 'mashed' by our young friend with the duelling propensities. I wonder where he has gone, and whether—it—would—be worth—while for a man—who has nothing particular to do—to follow up this charming little mystery? I wonder!"

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## CHAPTER IX.

DENIS went on his way, if not exactly rejoicing, at any rate, not broken-hearted. He had been turned out of his home in disgrace, and was a wanderer, it is true; but all the world was before him, and at Denis's age the world does not assume the terrible and forbidding proportions which it presents to older and more experienced men.

And then there was Nora! The thought that he carried her heart in his bosom buoyed him up with "the joy of love and the hope of joy." He thought of her as he tramped along the long miles to the coach road, and the more he thought of her the more he loved her; the charm of her beauty, her voice, and, more than all, her confession of love

for him, caused him to move in a kind of glamour, which every lover will understand.

He caught the coach, promptly relieved the driver of the reins, and drove the spanking chestnuts along the road at a pace which nearly gave an old gentleman passenger fits.

"I—I trust the young gentleman can—er—can drive, coachman?" he remarked, nervously.

"Drive, sir? What, Mr. Denis! Faith, and there isn't a better whip in all Ireland!" replied the man. "Perhaps you've never heard of Master Denis, of Dennison Hall? Ah, well, sir, more's the pity. Drive? He'd drive to the devil himself, if you wanted him to!" and he nodded admiringly at Denis. This was not very assuring—as the old gentleman only wanted to go as far as the railway—but he only sighed, and clung on to the rail; and Denis tooled the nags along presently to the station.

When he had got into the train, he found time and opportunity to reckon up his resources; that he had left the Hall without even a change of clothes, but, fortunately, he had still some money in his pocket, and he had left a few suits unfitted for country wear at his old rooms. Of course he was going back to London—everybody who has his fortune to make begins the manufacture in London, though more fortunes are lost in that city than made. He reached Cork just in time to catch the boat, and had a pleasant trip, notwithstanding that it was blowing hard enough to send most of the passengers to their bunks; but Denis had sailed too often on the squally Marishannon Lake to be upset by the vagaries of St. George's Channel; where it only blows one way at a time, at any rate.

He arrived in London late in the evening on a hot and dusty day, and taking a cab, told the man to drive to the Temple. But at the gate of that ancient abode of law and learning, he dismissed the cab, stood thinking for a moment or two on the pavement, and then walked down Fleet Street. Late as it was, the famous thoroughfare was all alive. Lights were burning behind the great windows of the newspaper offices, and from the basement came the clanging and clanking of the huge printing machines, grinding out the thousands upon thousands of copies of the daily and weekly journals. The music-halls were in full swing, mobs were pouring out of the theatres; omnibuses and cabs rolled heavily or dashed recklessly along the narrow roadway; while the pavement was thronged with thoughtful-looking men lounging in and out of the newspaper and printing offices.

There is a strange and mysterious charm about Fleet Street, the charm concerning which Dr. Johnson discoursed so eloquently, and its magic once felt, is never forgotten, and is never to be resisted. Denis turned up a narrow court, called the Blue Stag, and mounting the narrow and rickety stairs of one of the old-fashioned houses, knocked at a door on the second floor.

A gruff voice bade him "Come in," and Denis entered a small room, not too well lighted by a shaded gas-lamp. The room was not only small, but was so littered with newspapers, books, printers' proofs, and the usual miscellaneous lumber of an editor's room, that the man who sat at an ink-stained table, under the great green shade of the gas-lamp, looked as if he had entrenched himself against a siege.

He was a man of middle age, rather short and plump, with thick iron-grey hair, which tumbled all over his head from a habit he had of thrusting his hand into his hair when he was thinking deeply—and, as he was always thinking deeply, it is a marvel that he had any hair to rumple. It was a shrewd, pleasant face, with a touch of genial humour in the blue eyes and about the large lips, and the voice, though gruff, was not at all harsh or forbidding.

"Now, what the devil do you come worrying for again?" he demanded, without looking up from the fearful confusion of proofs and manuscripts over which he was bending. "I told you that I shouldn't be ready for another half hour, and here you are already! Get out!"

Denis laughed.

"Shan't!" he said.

The man looked up.

"Halloo, young 'un! it's you, is it?" he said. "I thought it was that wretch of a boy of mine come after 'copy' for the printer. Come in and sit down—if you can find a chair."

Denis found a backless chair piled high with papers, which he disposed of by tilting them on to the floor, and sat down.

"Don't let me disturb you, Sedley," he said. "I can wait until you're not busy."

"You'd have to wait until I am dead and buried," said Sedley, with a grin. "What the deuce brings you back so soon; or didn't you go, after all?"

"Yes, I went, and I'm back, because—" He paused.

"Well, I'm glad to see you, young 'un," said Sedley. "Wait until I correct this proof, and then I can talk to you. 'Bacco's just behind you, on the window-sill; you know where the whisky is."

Denis nodded, filled his pipe, got out the whisky and two glasses, and mixed for himself and Sedley, who took his glass with a nod, and fell to his proofs again, as if Denis were not there.

Talbot Sedley was the editor of the *Penny Cornet*, a struggling but promising paper, and Denis had made his acquaintance in one of the famous little public-houses which, buried in a Fleet Street court, are used—indeed almost known—only by journalists. The two men, though so dissimilar in every way—perhaps because of that very dissimilarity—had “cottoned” to each other at once, and become fast friends. They dined together at the “Worcester Cheese”—as the journalist pub is called, strolled unannounced into each other’s chambers, went to the theatre together—on Sedley’s “pass”—and took many a long walk into the beautiful country which is so strangely near and around the smoky city.

Sedley was an extraordinarily clever man—a perfect encyclopædia of knowledge—a ready writer, and a magnificent editor. He had risen literally from “nothing,” and, strange to say, his fight with the world had made him neither hard nor proud; and it nearly always does one or the other, and too often does both. Notwithstanding the heavy claims upon his time, and the fact that he was always hard at work, he had made leisure to cultivate Denis’s acquaintance, and had grown fond of the young man in a brotherly-fatherly fashion.

Of course, he knew all about Denis’s personal affairs and future prospects, and knew—what he could have prophesied correctly from the beginning—of Denis’s failure to pass his examination for the bar; in fact, Denis had confided in him with the frankness belonging to his nature, and the glorious age in which we do wear our hearts upon our sleeves—not only for daws to peck at, but for friends to see and sympathise with.

Presently Sedley finished his proofs and shouted down a speaking-tube. A boy, with printer’s ink liberally and impartially spread over his clothes and knowing-looking face, came up the stairs two at a time, and entered the room, took the proofs, nodded to Denis with a Cockney admixture of respect and familiarity, and went down again, three steps at a time, shouting, “’Er golden ’air was ’angin’ down ’er back,” and Sedley, leaning back, thrust his hand through his hair, took a pull at the whisky and water, filled his pipe, and said:

“And so you’re back already, my boy? Fire away! What’s happened? Why, dash it all, it only seems five minutes since you left.”

Denis smiled faintly.

"I'm glad to have been missed so much," he said.

Sedley eyed him keenly.

"You're in trouble—got into a mess; I can see that," he remarked. "You labour under the disadvantage of possessing a speaking countenance. Denis, my lad, get rid of it as soon as you can, or you'll find it inconvenient."

"Thanks; I will not forget your advice. Yes, I'm in trouble, and I'm in a mess," admitted Denis, as cheerfully as he could.

"What have you been doing? Stopped and robbed the coach, or flung the captain of the Channel boat overboard, and run her on a rock? You're equal to either exploit, I know."

"I've had a row with my uncle," said Denis, "and he—well, he presented me with the key of the street."

Sedley raised his eyebrows, and nodded gravely.

"Tell me all about it."

Denis told him—not all. He said nothing of the duel, or of Nora, be sure; and Sedley listened, smoking like a furnace.

"Sounds bad," he commented, briefly. "What a tremendous capacity you have for getting into scrapes. The Irish blood, I suppose. Well, there's only one thing to be done, young 'un; you must go home and eat humble pie. It's not a very toothsome dish, I'm aware; but we've all got to eat it some time, and always when we've the least appetite for it. Go back and say you're sorry, and won't do it again—whatever it was; and there you are, don't you know."

"I can't do that," said Denis, quietly, and so firmly that Sedley, after regarding him in silence for a moment or two, did not urge this course.

"Very well; what do you mean to do, then? I take it the law is no good—thrown up, eh?"

"Quite," said Denis. "I hate it. Always have hated it from the beginning."

Sedley nodded.

"I know. But that didn't matter, while you stood all right with the avuncular relative—you could always give him a pledge of reformation and industry. Uncles never refuse a pledge, you know," he punned. "But, now you've quarrelled—"

"I can't look to him for the future," said Denis, firmly, "and, frankly, Sedley, I wouldn't if I could. To tell you the truth, I'm ashamed of living, sponging on him. There

isn't too much of the ready at Dennison Hall, and—and --look here, I'm going to try and earn my living."

Sedley gazed at him with a very faint smile.

"How?" he asked, briefly.

Denis coloured.

"There must be some way," he said; "I'm not—a—fool."

"No; not always," assented Sedley; and Denis laughed at the qualified admission.

"There must be something I can do."

"I dare say there is," said Sedley. "It's easy enough to earn your living, and to make your fortune in London, if you know the way; but you've got to know the way; and it takes most men all their lives to learn it; and some of 'em don't learn it then. See here, Denis, my boy, I rather like you than otherwise, though you are by way of being a young swell, a genus I usually hate and abhor—I suppose, because I'm not a swell myself—and I advise you to sit tight and wait. Happen what will, you must be Lord of Dennison Hall, and its broad—or narrow acres—"

Denis coloured.

"And I'm to sit tight and wait for that, my uncle's death? I didn't think you'd say that, Sedley!" he remarked, reproachfully.

"Of course you didn't!" said Sedley, with genial sarcasm.

"You expected me to jump up and smack you on the back, and praise you for your noble spirit of independence; and to assure you of my sympathy, and my conviction that you'd make your fortune; in fact, to talk like the virtuous heavy man of the stage! You young fool, that's how I *should* talk if I didn't care a blow about you; but, you see, I do; and so I give you good advice, which, of course, makes you angry, and put on frills—"

"All right," said Denis; "keep your evil passions down."

"It's enough to rile a man," said Sedley; "but I will endeavour to keep calm, with a capital 'K.' You talk about making your fortune as if it were as easy as making a cigarette. Oh, I know what you're thinking—that I've made mine, if you can call the editorship of the *Penny Cornet* a fortune. It's true I began with nothing—"

"Came up with half a crown in your pocket, of course," said Denis, pleasantly.

"Wrong; it was one-and-ninepence," said Sedley, calmly.

"But, though I had only that princely sum in my pocket, I'd a journalist's brains in the back of my head, and a long



experience of roughing and starving it—which you haven't No, offence, Denis."

"Not a bit; you can't offend me," said Denis.

Sedley smiled.

"I think I could if I tried," he said. "But never mind that. Well, what can you do? Hold on, I'll tell you; shall I?"

Denis nodded.

"I want you to say just what you darned please, old man," he said; and he tilted the chair against the wall, so as to get a back, and refilled his pipe. "Fire away! I've heard so much truth about myself within the last few hours that I've got to quite like it."

"All right; if you're pining for it, you shall have it straight. You can swim, fish, drive a four-in-hand, and ride like—like an Irishman. You can wear your clothes as if they grew on you, and walk down Fleet Street as if the place belonged to you, but you wouldn't like any one to know it; and generally carry yourself like the confounded young swell you are. How's that?"

Denis nodded.

"All correct—a little highly coloured, perhaps—all correct, except the last part."

"And that's all you can do. It's enough for a man with a large income—it's enough for a man with immediate prospects—"

"—My uncle is likely to live for another score of years; and I sincerely hope he will—the dear old fellow!" said Denis, with a quiver in his voice.

"Right. But touching these accomplishments of yours. Well, you could open a fishing-tackle shop, start a shooting-gallery, teach swimming at one of the baths, turn jockey, or drive a 'bus or a hansom cab—that is, you could, if you could find a vacancy in one of these occupations, and if you weren't too proud to fill it."

"I'm too proud to live upon the charity of the man who has turned me out of his house," said Denis, flushing.

Sedley nodded.

"That's all right enough," he assented. "And the feeling, though a piece of sheer cussedness, does you credit."

"Thanks," remarked Denis. "That's the first decent word you've said—I don't know whether you know it."

Sedley took no notice of this, but reflected for a moment.

"Perhaps the old gentleman will climb down and send for you?" he suggested.

Denis shook his head.

"You don't know my uncle."

"No?" grinned Sedley. "But I know his nephew, and I'm pretty certain *he* won't climb down. What a peppery race you must be! Well, well, of course I can't understand it! At no time of my life could I afford to indulge in the luxury of temper; but with you it's different."

"As to affording—" said Denis, rather ruefully.

Sedley glanced at him quickly, and, for the first time, grew awkward and embarrassed.

"Er—touching the oof bird, my dear boy," he said, with a hesitation strongly contrasting with his late fluency. "If the bird does not fly at present, why—" He stammered and paused, and taking some gold from his waistcoat-pocket, pushed it along the ink-stained table.

Denis flushed, and pushed the coins back along the narrow lane between the papers.

"Thank you, old man," he said. "Don't be offended," for Sedley's face had clouded over. "I should take it like a shot if I were hard up, but I'm not at present."

He put his hand in his own pocket, and forked out a small quantity of gold and silver.

"You see?"

"Pshaw! How long will that last you?" exclaimed Sedley. "Not enough to keep you in gloves, and stalls at the Gaiety, for a week!"

"I'm going to do without gloves; and the Gaiety will have to close if it depends on me," said Denis, cheerfully. "I can get along with this for some time, until I can look round. And now I've taken up enough of your time, old man. But I knew you wouldn't mind my coming to you—"

"I should have cut up rough if you hadn't, young 'un," said Sedley. "Don't hurry for a minute or two.—Get out, you young ruffian! Come in again before another half hour, and I'll kill you on the spot!" This—as was a huge dictionary—was aimed at the printer's devil. The boy having grinned at the threat, and dodged the book, bounded downstairs; and Sedley leant back again.

"Look here," he said. "I'll think your case over—as the doctors say—and perhaps I can hit upon something. After all, I fancy—mind, I only fancy!—that you have got some brains—at any rate, you have got plenty of pluck and go, and something may turn up."

Denis got up, and laid his hand on the other man's shoul-

der, but wisely said nothing; and Sedley nodded, as if Denis had eloquently expressed his thanks; then he said, musingly:

"Tell me the name of the man you quarrelled with. I've half an idea that I've heard it before."

"Warner," said Denis.

Sedley shook his head.

"No; the other chap."

"Foyle, do you mean? I had no quarrel with him."

"Foyle—Foyle," mused Sedley. "What sort of man is he? A tall, thin, rather aristocratic man, with keen eyes, and a cynical way with him?"

"That's the man," said Denis. "The sort of man that makes you wild, though he says nothing you can take hold of. Do you know him?"

"I've met him—somewhere," replied Sedley. "Now, where—? Stop! I think I've got it."

He climbed over a pile of back numbers of the *Penny Cornet*, and got down from a shelf a volume like a ledger. It was covered with dust and smuts, and, as he banged it against the table, a cloud arose.

"The tomb of several promising careers, my boy," he said, drily. "Foyle—Foyle. Ah, here it is."

"What book is that?" asked Denis.

"My commonplace book," replied Sedley, as he perused a page. "At an early age I was taught that knowledge is power; and I've cultivated the habit of acquiring information from flower to flower, like our small and inquisitive friend, the bee. Also from dung-heap to dung-heap. Everything comes in useful one day or the other; and I owe a good deal to this and similar volumes. When found, make a note of, my boy! Now, then, for our friend Foyle. His first name is Spencer."

"Right!" said Denis.

"Son of a small country lawyer in Downshire. Came up to London on his own hook. Out the law, and became man about town. Plenty of money; but no one knows exactly what from. Got connected with several companies—all of which went wrong. Mixed up with the recent card scandal at the Warwick Club, in consequence of which young Winadale shot himself. Foyle disappeared. Has not been seen lately."

He looked up with a shrewd expression in his blue eyes.

"Humph! Not a very savoury reputation, that of your friend, eh, Denis?"

Denis shrugged his shoulders.

"No," he assented, rather indifferently.

"Sort of man to avoid, eh?" suggested Sedley.

"Evidently," said Denis, reaching for his hat. "But I am not likely to see anything of him again. He and the man Warner were, as I explained, only chance visitors at the Hall; they lost their way, and my uncle took them in; and it is very probable that I shall never meet him again."

He made the remark with all a young man's carelessness and confidence, little guessing at the future.

"Let's hope not," said Sedley, as he replaced the book on its grimy shelf.

"And now I'll go," said Denis. "I'm going back to the old diggings. I left them before my time was up, and I've got 'em rent free for another three or four weeks. And you'll come round and see me, Sedley?"

Sedley nodded, and held out his hand, and before Denis had got down the stairs, the editor of the *Penny Cornet* had dived into his sea of papers again.

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## CHAPTER X.

DENIS walked home slowly to his chambers in the Temple, making his way through the crowd absently enough. He let himself in, lit his lamp, and looked round the small den, in which he had spent so many months in wooing the goddess Themis—and wooing her in vain. Above the mantelpiece hung a sketch of Dennison Hall. He took this out of its frame, rolled it up, and hid it away at the back of a drawer; if he were going to make his own way in the world, it behooved him to forget that he was heir to an earldom, or anything but plain Denis Dennison, with his fortune to get.

It was a long time before he got to sleep, for all that Sedley had said kept recurring to him in the way unpleasant truths have; but he fell asleep at last, and dreamt that he was back in the Hall, and that he and Nora were fighting with swords, while Spencer Foyle looked on with his peculiar and annoyingly cynical smile.

In the morning he began that well-known game of "Waiting for Something to Turn Up." It is a dull and dangerous game; for while one is engaged in it one is always in peril of being tempted to play at something else even less profitable.

Day succeeded day, and Denis was still playing this game from which so many have risen ruined losers. Now and again Sedley came round, and found him sitting moodily over a pipe, or pacing up and down like a particularly bored and impatient lion in a menagerie cage; or he and Denis would meet and

dine at the quaint and inexpensive "Worcester Cheese"; or walk into the country, and return to supper at one of the restaurants in the Strand. And on all these, and other occasions of their meeting, Sedley would try and encourage Denis, and inspire him with hope, though he was obliged to confess that nothing had "turned up" which he could recommend to Denis.

"It isn't so easy to fit you, you see, my boy," he said one evening, as Denis and he were walking down-stairs from Sedley's chambers, proposing to have a chop at the "Cheese." "But what can you do? Don't get down on your luck. It seems to me, young 'un, that you are getting into the dumps rather. Now, that's bad! Look here; why don't you go out oftener? I mean to those tea-fights at the various houses you used to visit. They'd be pleased enough to see you, and a little of the society of the fair sex—a little, mind—wouldn't be bad for you just now. Have you paid any visits lately?"

Denis coloured and forced a laugh.

"No," he admitted. "I haven't been anywhere, since—since I came back. The fact is, I—I shirk it."

"Like the wounded deer, you seek to hide your head," as the poet remarks. That's nonsense!"

"I dare say," said Denis; "but there it is, all the same. I feel that things are changed with me, and that I should be a kind of impostor if I were to go to five-o'clock teas, and river picnics, as I used to do. Besides—" he paused. He could not say that, since he had discovered his love for Nora and won hers, all other women had lost attraction for him; and that the pretty girls he used to meet at the tea-table in Mayfair, and beside the lobster salads up the Thames, had no longer any charm for him. There was one woman in the world for Denis, and one only, and his love for her absorbed him. Why, he found himself murmuring her name as he wandered up the Strand or down Fleet Street; found himself calling up a vision of her lovely face, as he stared absently in the shop windows.

"Besides, I'm gloomy and depressed, and they'd worry me with questions, and— Who the deuce is this?" he broke off, as a short, thick-set man came in at the door below them. The man had a rugged but powerful face, with thick, bushy eyebrows, and a huge, ill-formed mouth, only partially hidden by the rough, reddish beard. He was dressed in a style halfway between that of a ship's captain and a well-to-do artisan, and carried a thick stick—strangely like himself in its ruggedness—in his ungloved hand.

Sedley swore. "Oh, confound it!" he said, under his breath. "It's that old nuisance, Culmer. Here, I'll try to get rid of him, or he'll hang on for hours. How do you do, Mr. Culmer?" he added to the man. "Coming up to see me?"

"Right the first time," responded the man, touching his bowler hat with the handle of his stick, by way of salute.

"Sorry!" said Sedley. "I'm engaged with this gentleman."

"All right," said the man, composedly, "I can wait. I've got something to show you."

"Well, the fact is, we were going to get a snack at the 'Cheese,'" said Sedley. "Won't to-morrow do?"

"Well, it might, or it mightn't," said Mr. Culmer. "If you and the gentleman ain't no objection, I'll join you in a snack. It's a long time since I've been near the manger."

"Come along, then," said Sedley, resignedly; and Mr. Culmer followed them, literally followed them, for he kept behind a few paces, either from shyness or habit.

"Queer fish, this," said Sedley, in an undertone to Denis. "I picked him out of a row in the Strand one night. He was more drunk than I have ever before seen a man, and, as he was surrounded by a mob who were admiring that heavy chain and diamond ring, it occurred to me that he was in some slight danger of losing them both. I ought to have left him to the police, I know, but there's a strain of the Good Samaritan in me which will land me in a mess some day, sure as fate."

"What is he?" asked Denis.

Sedley shrugged his shoulders.

"Sort of monomaniac, I was inclined to say; but he's as sane as you and I—perhaps saner, for I'm the editor of papers—and most of us are mad (so the rejected contributors say), and you are about as mad as they make them, young 'un. He's got a scheme, or an idea, or something of the kind in his brain; and as I was unfortunate enough to lug him out of the hands of the pickpockets and the police, he has conceived the notion that he's entitled to bore me to death. Most persons regard the wretched editor that way. It's a general weakness. When in doubt, harass an editor! See? Here we are. Ever been here before, Mr. Culmer?" he asked, as they entered the quaint old parlour of the old-fashioned public.

The man looked round the oak-panelled room, with the old-world, high-backed benches—what talent and genius had sat and lounged and slept upon those worm-eaten slabs of

mahogany!—and nodded at the faded portrait hanging at the end of the room.

“Not as I know of. Who’s that gent?”

“Dr. Johnson,” replied Sedley.

“Ah,” said Mr. Culmer, sinking heavily into a seat. “Never heard of him. Some kind of swell physician, I suppose.”

Sedley nodded and laughed as he and Denis took their seats.

“Chops for three, waiter; and let them be tender; at least, see that mine is, for I have no teeth. It doesn’t matter about the other gentlemen’s.”

The waiter grinned, as at an old and respectably-established joke. The chops, together with the ale for which the “Cheese” is famous, were brought, accompanied by potatoes in their jackets; and the simple but wholesome repast proceeded. Mr. Culmer made short work of his; eating with his knife, and disposing of the brown “October” in two gulps. He was quite silent while Denis and Sedley talked; but did not appear to be listening, his eyes being fixed on the table with a preoccupied gaze.

Denis had never before met a man like this, and was interested in him, noticing that Mr. Culmer, when he looked up, had a singularly furtive and absent way of glancing about him, and a voice that was low-pitched though rough.

When they had finished, Sedley rang for cigars, as a compliment to their guest; but Mr. Culmer eyed them with suspicion and indifference, and producing a blackened short clay, filled it with an ebony-coloured tobacco of Herculean strength.

Denis and Sedley also lit their pipes, and Sedley said:

“Is it whisky, Mr. Culmer?”

“It is whisky,” said Mr. Culmer. “It’s about the strongest thing there is, I suppose.” He took a long drink, and looked at Sedley tentatively. “I was coming to see you about that business of mine— Oh, I don’t mind speaking before the young gent; he is a gent, I can see,” he put in parenthetically.

“That’s all right,” said Sedley. “Yes, you can speak before my friend, Mr. Denis.” He gave the Christian name only, unthinkingly, and with no desire to conceal Denis’s surname; and had no time to supply the omission, for Mr. Culmer promptly touched his hat to Denis, and said:

“Proud to make your acquaintance, sir.”

Denis made a responsive gesture, and Culmer went on

"What I was wishing to see you about was this, Mr. Sedley. That there plot o' mine—"

Denis was amazed. Was the man a novelist, or playwright? Impossible!

"Oh, ah!" said Sedley. "Mr. Culmer, Denis, has—"

"Allow me to tell Mr. Denis," broke in Culmer, heavily. "It's this way, young sir," he continued, turning to Denis, but looking round with the peculiar expression—"I suppose we can't be heard here, Mr. Sedley?"

"Oh, Lor', no!" said Sedley. "My dear Mr. Culmer, more secrets are talked here every hour of the twenty-four than any other place in London."

"That's all right," remarked Mr. Culmer; "because I don't want no one to go shouting around what I've got to say. You see, Mr. Denis, I've got a good thing. Mr. Sedley there, he's laughing in his sleeve; he's a gent as knows so much that he don't believe in anything; and I'm bound to admit that he's most times in the right. For instance, that first day as I came and told you about that bit o' land o' mine in Australia, I'll wager my life you didn't believe me?"

"You're right," said Sedley, coolly but pleasantly.

"Ah!" Mr. Culmer drew a long breath, took another gulp of whisky, and jammed his tobacco down with a thick finger which appeared to be absolutely fireproof. "Well, perhaps you're right. What I told Mr. Sedley was this," he continued, addressing Denis again; "I'm one of those men as have knocked about the world a bit. There ain't a'most any place I haven't been to. A sort o' rolling stone, you might say, and you might chuck it in my teeth about 'gathering no moss'; but perhaps you'd be wrong in that. One of the places I've been to is Australia, Mr. Denis. Out there sheep-farmin'. 'Tain't a nice amoosement, by no manner o' means; but I stuck to it a bit, and, what's more strange, I stuck to the wages I earned. I bought a bit o' land with 'em. Land was cheaper in those days than it is now, you must remember.—We will have some more of this whisky," he broke off. "Waiter, the same as before, but a double whack. It takes too much valuable time a-huntin' for the reg'lar dose at the bottom of the glass."

Sedley laughed.

"I think we will be content with the ordinary quantity," he said.

"That's as *you* please, gents," said Mr. Culmer. "Well, this 'ere piece o' ground of mine was looking like a good investment, and I'd a nice herd o' sheep in it, when there came



that long drought you might have heard of. It's a rum thing, but as soon as Ned Culmer thinks he's got hold of a decent thing, something always turns up to knock the gilt off the gingerbread. It's my luck, Mr. Denis. But I'm thinking that luck is a-going to change. Them there sheep died like as they'd been poisoned—dropped off by scores, like flies; and I could do nothing but sit and look on. When they was gone, I made up my mind I'd had enough of sheep-farming, and I up and tried to sell the land. I did sell it; but something—call it a presentiment, if you like—whispered me to keep a bit of it. Perhaps it was just a whim, so as I could say that I was a land-owner in Australia."

He laughed, a short, grim kind of laugh, and immediately after glanced round as if to see if he had been overheard.

"It wasn't the best part of the land—only a little ornery-shaped piece amongst some rocks, as I kept; and I didn't see no use for it, not nohow. But it was just a fancy; and the day I was going to clear out, and tramp the country for work, I went and sat on one o' them rocks, and, while I was smoking my pipe, I struck the ground with my heel—like this." And he dug the heel of his heavy boot into the sanded floor; which instantly brought in the waiter, who looked round enquiringly, and disappeared again.

"I struck it like that, and I knocked out a small chip—"

"Of gold, wasn't it?" said Sedley, touching Denis's foot under the table, as much as to say: "Here's where the monomania comes in."

"No, Mr. Sedley," said Mr. Culmer, slowly, and without offence. "You've disrecollected. It wasn't gold, but gems. Opals is what it was, Mr. Denis."

Sedley touched Denis again.

"There it lay, a-looking like a lump o' soda what washer-women uses; and when I dug, and struck again, there was more of 'em."

Denis, though he thought the man was a monomaniac, could not help feeling interested. He glanced at Sedley, who shook his head slightly.

"I up and cleared out at once—it wouldn't a-done for me to be hanging about that place, or the other parties would have smelt a rat."

"And have dug up opals on their own ground," said Sedley.

"No; it wouldn't have been no use," said Culmer, quietly, "for there wasn't any—I tried the place myself at night. They was all on that ornery rocky little plot o' mine. I left

the place, and I went to Sydney, and—and—" He paused, and looked round. "Well, I went on the spree on the strength of it. You don't know what it is to spend eighteen months in a Heaven-forsaken wilderness of a place, and then find yourself within reach o' drinks and 'bacca, gents! And when I came out o' the hospital, and tried to sell that plot, they all thought I'd gone mad through the spree—all except some of the knowing ones, and they wanted to know the exact locality 'fore they dealt. But they're wanting to know still. So I come to London. And here I meets with Mr. Sedley, and I up and tells him; but he didn't believe me, because I'd lost the stones—had 'em stole, Mr. Denis."

Sedley looked at his watch. He was still wholly incredulous.

"But," continued Culmer, "perhaps he'll believe now."

As he spoke, he took a small tin box from his pocket, unrolled it from a wash-leather wrapper, and, opening the lid, poured out a small heap of stones upon the table.

Sedley leant forward, with sudden surprise and acutely-awakened interest.

"Why, these are opals!" he exclaimed, under his breath, as he took up some of the cut and uncut stones.

"That's so," said Culmer, heavily.

"I know something about gems," said Sedley—was there anything he did not know "something" about?—"and these—by George! look at this, Denis! It's magnificent!"

"Ain't it!" said Culmer, with the coolness of an accustomed mind. "But there's a better. Look at that, Mr. Denis."

Denis took the gem in his hand, and turned it about. It was a superb opal—not the ordinary kind of thing one sees by the bushel in jewellers' windows—but a gem full of life and fire and colours innumerable.

"And there's plenty more where that came from," remarked the owner, leaning back, and filling his pipe philosophically.

Sedley, with a slightly heightened colour, eyed him questioningly.

"Look here, Culmer," he said, "I owe you an apology, and I offer it. I thought you were just a kind of crank."

"I know it," said Culmer, quietly. "No offence, Mr. Sedley. I'm glad to show you the real thing. Seeing's believin', isn't it?"

"And what are you going to do?" asked Sedley. "Take

these to a well-known dealer in gems, and sell the 'and, eh, Culmer?"

The man shook his head slowly and decisively.

"No, Mr. Sedley," he said. "It was a kind of presentiment as induced me to keep that ornery corner of that land, and I don't mean parting with it."

"I see. You'll get up a company?"

"Not much. Companies ain't in my line, sir. No; what I intend to do is to work that plot myself. That is, myself and a partner. What I want—and that's why I came to you, seeing that you know everybody, and run across all sorts o' people—is to find a young fellow as is honest, and can be trusted, to go out with me and dig up them stones. If there is such a young fellow to be found, I'll share and share alike with him—and if he'll stick to me, I'll stick to him."

There was a pause. While Culmer gazed straight in front of him, Sedley bent over the gems and examined them, and Denis leant back, biting his lips thoughtfully.

"There ought not to be much difficulty in finding some one to accept such an offer," said Sedley. "It is a deuced good one, you know, Mr. Culmer."

"I know it," said Culmer. "But it won't be so easy to find my man as you think; that's why I offer such terms. The world may be slopping over with honest young men, but I haven't run against them so far. And it ain't only honesty as I want. I want a pal who'll stand by me, and—and—"

Sedley understood, and nodded.

"Yes," said Culmer, as if Sedley had spoken out. "I'm fond o' the drink—we'll have another glass, gents. No? Well, I will; it isn't a gallon of this mild stuff as would hurt me. I want a young fellow who'll keep a tight hand on me, and see me straight through. There's a brace of fortunes for us. A million, for all I know."

There was another silence.

"I'll look around," said Sedley, glancing at his watch. "Meanwhile, I should advise you to keep these things quiet." Culmer nodded.

"I've spoken to no one over here but you," he said.

Sedley rose, but Denis put a hand upon his arm.

"One moment, Sedley," he said. He spoke with a kind of hesitating eagerness, and his face was flushed. "I—offer myself as Mr. Culmer's partner—assistant."

Culmer blew out a dense cloud of smoke.

"I knew you would," he said; "that's why I told the

story. I've been watching you since the moment we came in here, and I've kind o' cottoned to you, Mr. Denis."

Sedley looked grave.

"Are you sure?" he said to Denis.

"I have decided," said Denis, as gravely.

Sedley turned to Culmer.

"I know Mr. Denis," he said. "He is—"

"Go easy, sir," said Culmer, interrupting him. "I've knocked about a goodish bit, and I know an honest man, aye, and a gentleman, when I see him, though I ain't much in the gent line myself. If Mr. Denis means business—why, there's my hand!"

He stretched out a huge paw, and Denis placed his in it.

Both men were pale with suppressed excitement.

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## CHAPTER XI.

MR. CULMER drew a long breath of satisfaction and took a pull at his glass.

"*That's* all right!" he said, cheerfully. "The next thing is: when will you be ready to start, Mr. Denis?"

"Whenever you like," replied Denis, with the eagerness of youth and inexperience. "To-day, to-morrow, if you wish."

Mr. Culmer smiled.

"That's what I like," he remarked, with a nod of approbation. "No shilly-shallying, no drawin' back and hangin' off about you, Mr. Denis—"

"Hold on," said Sedley, speaking for the first time since the compact had been made. "I shall want to talk this over with my friend. It's all very well, but I've some responsibility in the matter, as I introduced you to each other. I shall talk it over with Mr. Denis, and I reserve his right to draw back, if he chooses—"

"Sedley!" broke in Denis.

"Shut up! Come to my office at twelve o'clock to-morrow, Mr. Culmer, and Mr. Denis will give you a decided answer. If he is still resolved to join you, I shall ask you to sign a little agreement which I shall draw up, and then—well, you may start when you like."

"That's fair and only right," assented Culmer; "and I will be there at the hour. I wish you good night, gentlemen; you'll drink to our luck and fortune? No? Well, I will—as I go out."

He shook hands with them and departed, his heavy step making itself heard plainly over the sanded floor.

"Well, this is a rum go!" remarked Sedley. "Commend me to the recklessness of youth! My dear fellow, have you thought—but of course you haven't thought of all you've undertaken! Just reflect for a moment."

"I have reflected," said Denis; but Sedley waved a hand exhorting him to silence.

"You have undertaken to accompany this man—who is a nobody knows who—to a nobody-knows-where place in Australia to dig for gems whose existence is unproved, excepting for his possession of those stones, which he may have stolen for all we can tell. It strikes me as rather a large order."

Denis remained quiet, and waited.

"How do you know that the man is not a double-dyed scoundrel, and will not lead you—like a lamb—into the wilds and slaughter you? It's been done, my young friend—it's been done!"

"Yes, I daresay; but Mr. Culmer would scarcely take me there for the mere pleasure of slaughtering me; and as I haven't any money, he can't have robbery as his motive. Besides, two can play at the slaughtering game." And he smiled. "Look here, Sedley, I believe in the man—"

"Of course you do," remarked Sedley, ironically.

"—And why shouldn't I? Why should he hatch this tale if it wasn't true?"

"Well, grant that," said Sedley; "and still it's a large order. You've not only got to go to the other end of the world and work like a common labourer—for I know something of mining, and it's harder than playing on the fiddle, young man—but you've got to keep your partner in order. How are you going to do that? Suppose he takes it into his head to break out and go on the spree?"

Denis coloured.

"I should knock him down and keep him down till the fit was over," he said. "I know that it's not a very high-class kind of enterprise; but—what would you have?—I'm fit for nothing better; haven't you said so yourself?"

"The nephew of the Earl of Dennison, the heir to the title and estates, going out to dig for opals and play keeper to a confirmed drinkist! To be the partner of a man whose character, I shrewdly suspect, will not bear examination! Hem!"

Denis coloured again.

"Well," he said, "put it at its worst, it's better than idling about Fleet Street and the Strand, and eating one's heart out. And look at the temptation—the stakes! A million of money, he said; and, allowing for exaggeration, if it's only half a

quarter of that sum, it's worth risking. And what do I risk? Not money, for I haven't any; and as to my life and limbs—well, I suppose I can take care of myself.”

Sedley smoked in silence for a minute or two, then he said:

“This is my doing. If any harm comes to you, Denis, I shan't be able to eat or sleep for—quite a week. Well, go home and think it over. And see here, don't be ashamed of drawing back if you feel inclined to do so; better draw back while there's time than make a mess of your life for the sake of sentiment.”

“I shouldn't draw back,” said Denis, quietly. “I've given my word, and once a Dennison's word is passed—”

“All right, your royal highness,” said Sedley, with a smile. “Meet me to-morrow, after thinking over all I've said, and—luck go with you, whatever you decide.”

Denis went home, walking on air. Visions of “wealth beyond the dreams of avarice” rose and danced before him as he tossed on his bed. There was no question of whether he should go or not. Go? Of course he would go. There was a chance of making the fortune which he had determined to make. He would be rich—rich! And he would come back and marry Nora, and—and they would be happy ever afterwards. What did it matter that he was the nephew of an earl and heir to the title? Better men than he had broken stones on the road, driven milk-carts, and tended sheep. And there was no great hardship, no ignominy, in manual labour. Better dig for opals than mooch about all day waiting for something to turn up. Why, something *had* turned up, and he should be a fool—worse, a coward—if he drew back and neglected to grasp at it.

A quarter of an hour before the appointed time he strode into Sedley's chambers.

“I said twelve,” remarked Sedley, looking up from his papers. “Sit down; I'll get through in a few minutes.”

Denis could not sit still, so he walked up and down the room, and presently Sedley looked up.

“I needn't ask how you've decided,” he said. “I can see it in your face. Didn't sleep much last night, I should say, judging by your extremely interesting pallor. Oh, Lord! what a thing youth is!”

“Of course I've decided. Or, rather, I never thought of going back,” said Denis. “Isn't Culmer late?”

“It hasn't gone twelve yet,” said Sedley. “And now look here; you will leave me to arrange the preliminaries, if you please. I ask this as a right. I want to soothe my con-

science, so that if you should be murdered, or come back here penniless and in rags, I can console myself with the reflection that I did my best for you. See?"

"I see," said Denis, laughing shortly. "You shall do as you like, so long as I go. I want that fortune, Sedley. I want it! You think me a mercenary, sordid kind of chap, I daresay; but I've a use for that money."

"You don't say so!" retorted Sedley, with an affected stare of surprise. "Really! Dear me, you are the first man I have met with who had a use for money. Hush! here he is. Now you sit down and keep your mouth shut while I arrange."

There was a knock at the door, and Culmer entered. He was dressed exactly as he had been on the previous night, touched his forehead with his rugged stick, and looked round the room with a thoughtful, furtive glance, just as before.

"Good morning, Mr. Culmer," said Sedley. "Well, Mr. Denis has decided to join you."

Culmer smiled.

"I knew he would," he said. "A gentleman don't go back on his word. So I've spent the morning buying some tools and such like things as we shall want."

Sedley nodded.

"I hope you haven't been too premature," he said. "I've drawn out a little agreement, and you may not like it. And if you shouldn't, the affair is off, as I shall not alter it."

"Let's look," said Mr. Culmer, coolly.

He took the single sheet of paper on which the agreement was written, and bent his thick brows at it, then handed it back.

"You read it," he said. "I ain't much in the way of this kind o' thing."

Sedley read. It was a simple deed, occupying only a few lines, and it provided that, in consideration of his joining and working with Culmer, Denis should take half the proceeds of the result of their labour, and become possessor of half the piece of land on which they worked. In addition, Culmer was to pay Denis's passage out, and provide all tools and necessary machinery.

At this clause Denis was about to open his mouth and suggest that his passage-money should only be a loan, but Sedley looked at him threateningly, and he held his tongue.

"That's all right," said Mr. Culmer. "I don't object. I've got the money; sold some of them stones this morning. The jeweller opened his eyes; would have taken a bushel, if

I'd had 'em. Wanted to know where I got 'em, and he's still wanting to know, I expect. Where do I sign?"

"One moment," said Sedley. "Before you both sign, I should like to remark, Mr. Culmer, that I've answered for Mr. Denis's respectability and the rest of it, and to remind you that neither of us knows very much about you. In fact, beyond the fact of your name—"

"What do you want to know?" asked Culmer, looking at him and then at the littered floor. "Where I was born, how old I am, whether I've had the measles, and if so, how much?"

"Even those items of information would be acceptable," said Sedley, cheerfully; "but something more would be still better. You've no objection to giving us a reference or two, Mr. Culmer?"

The man lifted his eyes.

"What for," he said, grimly. "What do you want references for? Ain't I showed you the stones; *ain't* I the owner of the plot, and ain't I findin' the capital and expenses? What's it matter to you who and what I am and where I came from? Do you think I ain't honest and to be trusted?" A reddish colour rose to his hard and rugged face. "Come to that, what is there I can steal, and how much are you trustin' me with?"

"It's not usual—" began Sedley, rather floored by the man's logic; but Denis cut in as if he could not contain himself any longer.

"Mr. Culmer is right, Sedley," he said, with an apologetic glance at his friend. "As he says, I am not trusting to anything but his veracity, and I can't see why he should have romanced."

Mr. Culmer looked puzzled for a moment.

"If you mean is the opals there, Mr. Denis, why, yes, they are. Bushels of 'em, I should say. And if they ain't, where's the harm to you? You get your passage out, and a pleasant trip."

"Quite so," said Denis, promptly. "I am quite satisfied."

"And I am not," said Sedley. "Come, Mr. Culmer, tell us something about yourself," he added, persuasively.

Culmer cleared his throat and looked as if he were about to be communicative, then he checked himself.

"I'm damned if I do!" he said. "Take me as I am, or leave me. What I am, or have been, an' where I come from hasn't anything to do with this business. If you ain't satisfied that I ain't going to cheat you—though damn me if I can see



how I could do it—well, we'll cry off, and say no more about it."

Sedley glanced at Denis, saw that he was resolved to trust the man and waive the references. With a shrug of his shoulders, he spread out the agreement and handed Mr. Culmer a pen.

Culmer wrote his name in clumsy and splodgy letters of a huge size, and Denis appended his signature.

"Now, then," said Sedley, "with your joint permission, I will take charge of this interesting little document. See, I'll lock it up in the safe—it's warranted fire and burglar-proof—and there it will remain until you call for it."

Culmer nodded, and Sedley deposited the agreement in a drawer in the safe, clanged to the door, and locked it with an air of completing the business.

"And now—"

"We'll have a smack and a glass of that whisky," said Culmer, "and while we're putting it through, I'll tell you my plans, Mr. Denis. If convenient to you, I should like to start the day after to-morrow; that will give you time to get your kit ready, kiss your young lady good-bye"—Denis was foolish enough to blush like a girl—"I beg your pardon, Mr. Denis; no offence."

"That's all right," said Denis, pleasantly. "I shall be ready to start the day after to-morrow, Mr. Culmer. Meanwhile, I'll get my outfit."

Mr. Culmer nodded.

"You don't want no extensive kit for this business, Mr. Denis. Plain and simple and hard-wearing is the ticket. There ain't no society, nor dinner-parties, nor womenkind where we're going."

Denis remembered this sensible advice when he and Sedley went the next day to purchase the necessary outfit; indeed, Denis's money would not go further than the plainest and simplest. These he had packed in a strong wooden box, with iron clasps at the corners, and sent straight to the vessel.

Then he and Sedley dined at a favourite restaurant, where you can really get a good dinner of four courses for three shillings, and a bottle of genuine Rhine wine for another two, or, better still, superb lager beer, which is amber in the glass and nectar in the mouth; and all through the meal Denis talked—talked as youth will—of his strange enterprise in the land of no-one-knew-where, and of the prospect of that fortune which he wanted so badly.

Sedley was quiet, and listened rather than talked. He was

fond of Denis, and not at all easy in his mind about this vague undertaking on which the young man was so hopefully embarking. And yet would it have been right to have dissuaded him? What else could he, Denis, have done? Better, as he had said, that he should risk this thing, than hang about the Strand, and eventually join the noble army of those who frequent the bars, and ultimately drift down that steep hill which is so extremely easy to descend and so difficult to climb up again.

"I suppose you've written home?" he said.

Denis shook his head.

"No. I—I did think of it; but I decided that I would not. You see, this thing may fail."

"It may," put in Sedley, drily.

"And if it should, then my uncle—everybody at Marishanon—would laugh and sneer, and say that they 'thought how it would end.'"

"Which they would," assented Sedley.

"So I have not written," said Denis. "If I come back with my pockets full of money, as the song says, why, then I can tell them how I got it."

"And they'll say they always thought there was something in you," said Sedley.

Denis was silent for a minute or two. He longed to write to Nora, but he could not do so. It would probably have been the first letter she had ever received; the postman would recognise his handwriting, and go round the place with the news that "Master Denis was writin' to Nora Neil, begorra!" And she would be questioned—perhaps get into trouble. No, he would not write to her. And perhaps, after all, it would be as well, dearly as he longed to pour out his soul on a sheet of note-paper, and tell her of all his hopes, and of the glorious future that awaited them, if—if he succeeded: and of course he would succeed.

"Then no one knows where you are going but Culmer and I?" said Sedley, thoughtfully.

"Yes," said Denis; "so that if I come back in rags and hungry, there'll only be you to say 'I told you so!'" And he laughed.

Sedley smiled rather pensively.

"You'll write to me, of course?" he said.

"Yes, of course—that is, if there is a post from the place, or if Culmer doesn't object to my doing so. He naturally wants to keep the spot a secret. But whether I can write or not, I—I shan't forget you, old man, or all you have done for

me. You have been a true friend—" he faltered, with that beautiful awkwardness which overcomes the modern young man when he ventures to express his emotions.

"That's all right," said Sedley. "By the way, I've bought you a little present. I suppose your royal highness will not be too proud to accept it?"

"I'd take anything from you but money, old chap, and even that if I wanted it."

"Very well, then; accept this slight token of my regard."

He drew a revolver—a good one, not a toy—from his pocket and laid it on the table.

Denis laughed, and flushed with amusement and gratitude combined.

"Thanks," he said. "But I shan't want it, I hope."

"So do I; but you never can tell. Anyhow, you may find it useful. I imagine that you won't find a policeman at every corner of the place where you're going to, and this little trinket will be handy in the event of a row. Of course you will shoot Mr. Culmer at sight if he attempts any treachery or foul play."

"All right," said Denis. "I promise to shoot him, hold an inquest over him, and bury him decently if he should prove a villain; but I don't think he will, somehow."

They dropped into a music-hall after dinner; but it may be safely said that neither man paid much attention to the clever artists. But it was better than sitting alone and trying to forget that they were going to part. But the moment came at last, and the two friends stood in the quiet Temple garden, with hands clasped and grave faces.

"Good-bye, young 'un," said Sedley, with exceeding gruffness. "Write to me if you are in trouble—and come back, rich or poor, clothed in fine linen and purple or in rags; only come back."

Denis could only nod and mutter "Good-bye." And so they parted.

At ten o'clock the next morning, Denis and Culmer stood on the deck of the steamer, looking at the quay which was slipping away from them.

"We're off at last," said Culmer. "And darn me if I'm sorry to get away. You see, a fellow as has been used to breathing fresh air finds himself rather short of the article in this yere London. Besides, now we're on the job, I'm anxious to be digging up them stones."

Denis scarcely heard him. He was thinking of Dennison Hall, of the passionate old man there, and of the girl who

had clung to him and whispered that she loved him. And it was of her he thought more than of anything else.

"Good-bye, Nora!" his lips said, though no word was audible. "I will come and claim you one day. My love—my wife!"

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## CHAPTER XII.

LADY BLANCHE drove home after her scene with Nora and Mrs. Neil in anything but a nice temper. And when she was in a bad temper—which was often—my Lady Blanche showed it. She was not hot and passionate, like Nora, for instance—who was all fire and fury for, say, five minutes, and then sorry for it—but somewhat sullen and peevish and full of that spite which nourisheth itself. When she reached Esdaile, she flung herself out of the phaeton, without a glance at the frightened and reeking horse which she had flogged unmercifully, and going through the hall, went up the stairs and bounced into Lady Esdaile's *boudoir*, where her ladyship was sitting at the writing-table.

Lady Esdaile was quite unlike her daughter. She was thin and dark, with delicate features, and little or no colour; whereas Lady Blanche was fair and fresh-coloured, with the full lips and strongly-moulded nose which have been already described.

The mother and daughter were also strangely dissimilar in manner and expression. Lady Esdaile was calm and composed, with that serenity which is derived from gentle birth; she was slow in speech and deliberate in movement, and her voice was soft and rather melancholy. Her manners were—as they ought to have been—perfect, and she was exquisitely self-restrained and dignified. In all which she was a striking contrast to her daughter.

She looked up from her writing with a faint line of disapprobation on her white forehead, as the girl bounced in, and asked in a low voice:

"What is the matter, Blanche?" The tone was rather cold as well as reproving, for there had never been much sympathy between the refined and serene mother and the full-voiced, loud-mannered daughter. "You look hot—and annoyed."

"I am hot, and annoyed, too," said Blanche, peevishly, as she flung herself on a dainty settee, and began to pluck off her gauntlets violently.

"What is the matter? Will you please shut the door?"

Lady Blanche rose and shut the door, none too gently—bringing another line into Lady Esdaile's brow—and flung herself down again.

"I've just met Denis—"

"Mr. Denis," murmured Lady Esdaile, who detested the vulgar familiarity with which the present generation of young girls docks men's names of their prefixes.

"Well, Mr. Denis. Fancy my calling Denis 'Mr;'" and Lady Blanche laughed scornfully.

"He is of an age to warrant it," said Lady Esdaile; "but go on."

"Well, he is going—gone, I should say. Fancy, and only arrived last night! The row at the Hall has proved serious, and I suspect Denis—I mean Mr. Denis"—impatiently—"has been turned out. At any rate, he and the Earl have had a genuine split."

Lady Esdaile frowned and sighed. Her daughter's language jarred on her, as the creaking of a door or the drawing of a pencil on a slate will jar.

"You mean that Denis and the Earl have quarrelled, and separated for a time?" she said, correctly. "But why should that cause you annoyance?"

Lady Blanche coloured, and tugged at the pin which secured her hat.

"Oh, I don't know. One doesn't like to lose an old pal—friend," she corrected, quickly, but with a *mouse* of contempt for the necessity. "He's come back an awfully nice fellow, and if he had stayed would have brightened us up. Why, we might have had no end of fun."

Lady Esdaile took up her pen and sighed.

"I beg of you not to use slang, my dear Blanche," she said, in a low voice. "If you knew how it pains me, how unsuited it is to a young girl—to any young girl—but especially to one of your rank and position."

"I'm sorry," said Blanche, curtly and sullenly. "I only talk as every one else does. But it wasn't only that. I've had a row—I've just met that Neil girl, and she was impudent and impertinent."

"Nora Neil?" said Lady Esdaile, quietly, and somewhat incredulously. "I am surprised. She has always seemed to me so quiet and well-behaved."

Lady Blanche laughed scornfully.

"Well-behaved and quiet! You should have seen her just now! A young fury—a tiger-cat."

"Hush, I beg of you!" said Lady Esdaile. "Such epi-

thets are an exaggeration, and worse—unjust. I know the girl—have known her from childhood—and I have never seen anything amiss with her.”

“That’s because you haven’t seen her when she was riled,” retorted Lady Blanche. “I have, and that’s the difference. I say she can be impudent enough when it suits her.”

Lady Esdaile laid down her pen.

“What have you said to her?” she asked. “It must have been something particularly exasperating to move a girl like Nora Neil.”

Now, Lady Blanche, for obvious reasons, was not desirous of telling her mother what had passed between herself and Nora.

“I only asked her a few ordinary questions,” she said, sullenly, “and she answered me back and defied me.”

“Defied you?” said Lady Esdaile. “What had you said or done to cause defiance. You have no authority over Nora Neil, Blanche. She is nothing to you, in no way subservient to you.”

“I don’t know about that,” said Blanche. “For one thing, she is a—a common village girl, and I am Lady Blanche Esdaile.”

“And should therefore set her an example of courtesy and self-restraint, surely!” said Lady Esdaile, in her low voice.

“And for another,” continued Blanche, ignoring the rebuke, “her mother and she are pensioners of ours, aren’t they? One doesn’t give money to persons of that class to be repaid with insolence.”

“Mrs. Neil is a pensioner of mine,” said Lady Esdaile, with a slight emphasis on the “mine;” “that is true, but the small sum she receives has been well earned. Have you forgotten, Blanche, that the woman was your nurse—your foster-mother? Surely, surely, you must feel that she has some claim—a great and undeniable claim—upon us; not only on our assistance but upon our regard.”

Lady Blanche pursed her lips.

“I suppose she was well paid for her services,” she said.

Lady Esdaile sighed.

“There are some services which no money can sufficiently remunerate,” she said. “Mrs. Neil stood to you in the place of a mother.”

Lady Blanche rose impatiently and then sunk down again.

“That’s no reason why that daughter of hers should be insolent to me,” she said; “and I think, if you ask me, that it would be a good deal better for her if she were out in service,

than hanging about Marishannon with nothing to do but flirt with her bettera."

Lady Esdaile looked almost stern.

"I did not ask you, Blanche," she said, in a tone that ought to have made the girl want to sink through the floor.

"Nora remains at home because her mother is an invalid, and requires her daughter's care and attention."

"Oh, she's better now," said Blanche. "She was quite well enough to come out and join in the row, and back up her precious daughter."

"I am glad to hear that Mrs. Neil is stronger. But may I ask what you intended to imply when you charged Nora with flirting?"

Blanche bit her lip. She had gone further than she had intended.

"Oh, I expect she is ready and willing enough to do so," she said, with affected carelessness.

"And it is on such slight grounds you accuse her?" said Lady Esdaile, reprovingly. "Blanche, I am almost glad you have told me this, hateful as it has been for me to hear it, because it affords me an opportunity of saying that I shall be glad if you will refrain from interfering with the Neils. I know you dislike the girl—I have remarked the way in which you have spoken of her—but her mother is an old and faithful servant, and I—and you—owe her too much to make her unhappy. As for Nora, I have always found her as well-behaved and respectful as any girl of her class—indeed, she has the manners of a lady."

Lady Blanche opened her mouth, as if to interrupt with scorn, when some one knocked at the door, and in response to Lady Esdaile's "Come in," Lord Esdaile entered.

He was a tall, aristocratic man, with rather a stern face. At his entrance, Blanche rose and began to gather her hat and gloves together. She was rather afraid of her father, and, from her childhood, a word or a cold glance from his keen eyes had always awed her.

"I beg your pardon, my dear. I am afraid I interrupt you," he said to his wife, with the pleasant courtesy of a polished gentleman; then he looked at the girl, and his manner grew cold.

"Blanche, I have just seen the horse you have been driving this morning. It is trembling, and covered with sweat; in fact, in a condition that no horse should be in. Have you been over-driving it—beating it?"

Lady Blanche bit her lip. "It's an ill-tempered beast,

and I daresay I flicked it with the whip once or twice," she said, with an attempt at effrontery; but her eyes fell before her father's stern gaze.

"On the contrary, it is one of the best-tempered horses in the stable," he said, coldly. "It is a shameful thing for any one to ill-use an animal, it is doubly shameful for a woman—a young girl—to do so. I have seen the marks of the whip on its coat. Let me beg of you to restrain your ill-temper; at any rate, not to vent it on the dogs and horses, who are not—indeed, shall not be—compelled to endure it."

Lady Blanche crimsoned, and opened her mouth as if about to reply; but her courage failed her, and, with a toss of the head—her face averted from his stern regard—she flounced out of the room. The Earl went to the window, and stood looking out thoughtfully and sad.

"Blanche troubles me," he said, presently. "I cannot—understand her. Or, rather, how a child of yours should possess such a disposition. Scarcely a day passes but I have cause to—am obliged to lecture her for some folly or other."

Lady Esdaile was silent. She could not deny the truth of her husband's plaint, but she was too loyal to her daughter to endorse it. Mothers suffer in silence.

"There must be some bad strain cropping up in her," he continued, musingly and sadly. "It will sometimes. But I never heard of an Esdaile with a disposition like Blanche's; and your people," he laughed lovingly—"well, were all angels, like yourself, my dear."

"Blanche is young—"

"Oh, I hope she will outgrow it—yes," he assented. "This morning I have received a bill from the linen-draper's; it is a tremendous one, and I fancy nearly all the items are purchases of Blanche's. And there is another from the jeweller's." He laughed again. "She couldn't be more extravagant if she were a young man. I wish she were—I beg your pardon, my dear; I didn't mean that!" he added, quickly, as he saw the look of pain in his wife's pale face. "And I didn't come to talk of Blanche, by the way. That young fellow, Donovan, has been up here this morning."

"Donovan—from the Hall?" said Lady Esdaile.

He nodded.

"Yes. There seems to have been a tremendous quarrel between Denis and Lord Larry. There is some story of a man—a visitor—at the Hall, being hurt or wounded in some way; Donovan wanted to tell me, I think, but I cut him short. Denis has gone, anyway."



Lady Esdaile sighed.

"Yes, Blanche has told me. But Donovan—?"

"Oh, he came to ask me about the Meadow Farm—he wants me to let it to him."

"Donovan is young to take a farm," said Lady Esdaile. She interested herself in everything concerning the estate, and Lord Esdaile often declared that she was of more use than the steward.

"Yes, but he has money. An uncle in America left him some, and he tells me that Dennison will help him."

Lady Esdaile smiled. "Poor Lord Larry! always ready to lend money, though he should have to borrow it himself."

"Yes, that is a Dennison all over."

"But Donovan is not married, and a farmer ought not to be a single man, ought he?"

"That is what I told him," said Lord Esdaile, with a faint smile; "but he reminded me that it was a disqualification easily set right. It seems that he wants to get married."

"Yes; to whom?"

"You will never guess. To Nora Neil."

Lady Esdaile turned her fine, tranquil eyes upon her husband with faint surprise.

"To Nora!"

"Yes; you are surprised; and so was I, though I'm sure I don't know why; do you?"

Lady Esdaile was silent a moment, and the faint line came into her forehead again.

"No—o. And yet—Nora and he are so different! I mean that—well, he scarcely seems worthy of her."

"Donovan has an excellent character," said Lord Esdaile.

"Character—oh, yes! But—but, well, he is just one of the lads about the place; and Nora is—is so refined, and—I don't quite know what word to use to describe her."

"All the same, she is just a peasant," said Lord Esdaile.

"She is, and yet so different. She looks and speaks in—I hate the word, but can find no other—so superior a fashion. And her manners are so far above those of her class. She could easily be mistaken for a lady."

"I have noticed that," said Lord Esdaile, drumming softly on the window-pane. "Yes, I have noticed that. It is strange. But her mother is a superior kind of woman. Being here with you so much—"

Lady Esdaile smiled.

"To know you and to love you is a liberal education, my dear," he added.

"Thanks. And Nora—what does she say?"

"Nothing at present, for the simple reason that Donovan has not spoken to her yet."

"Not spoken to her?"

"No. He admitted, with a certain amount of shamefacedness, that he hadn't been able to pluck up courage."

"I am not surprised at that."

"No; he says that he has 'loved her from afar'—of course those were not his words—ever since he can remember; but that he did not consider himself good enough for her."

"Donovan is a young man of sense," said Lady Esdaile, quietly.

"He is. A nice, modest lad. But when this money fell to him, he naturally began to cherish a certain amount of hope. Donovan, a servant at the Hall, and Donovan, tenant of Meadow Farm, are very different individuals."

"Yes."

"I don't suppose that there is a girl in the place who wouldn't jump at him."

"Nora will not jump at him—or at any one," said Lady Esdaile, with an air of conviction.

"No; but he thinks that she may not refuse him; may, at any rate, give him some hope."

Lady Esdaile looked before her thoughtfully.

"He counts upon the mother, Mrs. Neil, putting in a good word for him. You see, she would live with them at the farm, and would be so much better off than in the Lake Cottage."

"That is true," said Lady Esdaile; "but I have a feeling that Nora wouldn't be influenced by her mother in such a matter as—as love and marriage, at any rate."

"Then it would not be of any use your speaking to Nora?" he said, tentatively.

Lady Esdaile almost started.

"I?" she said, in a low voice, and with a certain air of trouble and reluctance.

"Yes. Donovan ventured—respectfully enough—to ask if you would stand his friend with Nora. He knows, of course, that you have a great deal of influence with her, and that a word from you—"

Lady Esdaile took up her pen, and then laid it down again.

"That sounds reasonable enough," she said, "and yet I feel as if I could not do it. I cannot tell you why, but I entertain a kind of—of—regard for the girl, above and beyond that which could be accounted for by the fact of her being the

daughter of a faithful servant. And that being so, I—I—well, I should feel as if the responsibility were too great. Can you understand the feeling, Gerald?"

"I think I can," he said. "I have not seen so much of the girl as you have, but I have always been conscious of a friendly regard for her. I suppose because she is so extremely beautiful. That's the way with us all, isn't it? A pretty woman has not only the good looks, but everybody's ready sympathy into the bargain."

Lady Esdaile inclined her head.

"She is very beautiful," she said. "And Donovan wants me to speak to her?"

"Yes; will you?"

"I—I don't know," she said, slowly. Then suddenly she looked up, with a vague expression of trouble and anxiety. "No, I will not. Let Donovan speak to her himself."

"And if she says 'No'?"

Lady Esdaile frowned softly at her note-paper.

"You want him to have the farm?"

"Frankly, yes," he said. "Good tenants are none too plentiful in these days, and Donovan looks promising. Of course, I shall not let it to him while he is unmarried."

"If he is unsuccessful with her, I—yes, I will speak to her," said Lady Esdaile; but she spoke with the same reluctance, and she arranged the note-paper before her absently.

Lord Esdaile took the hint, went and kissed her forehead, and left the room.

Lady Esdaile wrote for a moment or so, then she looked up, and passed her hands over her eyes.

"Why should I hesitate to speak to Nora for him?" she asked herself, as if she were puzzled by her reluctance. "It would be a good match for the girl, and—I wonder why I dislike it so much?"

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### CHAPTER XIII.

Now, a few days after Lord and Lady Esdaile's talk over Nora, she herself was seated on the boulder on the beach, looking over the lake, and little guessing that she had been the subject of conversation between those exalted personages.

One of those ornamental beings, the poets, has remarked that it is hard for those who love to go, but harder still for those who remain; and, unlike some of the things poets say, this is true. Those who go generally have the excitement of

those who stay behind too often have nothing to do but dwell upon their loss. Denis, as has been seen, had plunged into adventure and dreams of opaline wealth, and, though he did not forget Nora, he had something to occupy his mind; but Nora! Ah, well, after she had got through the few and simple house duties, she had nothing to do but wander through the wood, or climb the cliff, and gaze out over the lake, and think of, and dream over, the man she loved; the man she ought not to love, because he was a gentleman, and so much above her. Sometimes she took a book with her—Mrs. Neil had a few on a shelf in the best room of the cottage—but they were not very entrancing, and Nora knew them all by heart. It was partly from these books, as much as from her small amount of schooling, that she had acquired her refinement and delicacy of mind.

No other peasant girl in her circumstances cared for books but Nora longed for them with a desire which had grown all the more intense since she had discovered her love for Denis and had won his. If she could only become worthy of him! But how could she? Do what she would, she must still remain Nora Neil—the girl of the Lake Cottage; while he was the heir to an earldom, and belonged to the class to which Lady Blanche belonged. It was with a lady like Blanche Edaile that he should have fallen in love—it was such a lady whom he would have to marry. She, Nora, was as dust beneath the feet of Lady Blanche. All this bitterness mingled with her love-dreams as she looked over the lake, and her eyes grew dark as the violet, under her straight brows.

She was so rapt that she did not hear footsteps until they were close behind her, and she did not turn her head until she heard a voice, a pleasant and very shy voice, said:

“Good afternoon to you, Nora.”

Then she glanced over her shoulder, and replied, courteously enough, but with that polite indifference which is so terrible for a lover to hear, “Good afternoon, Donovan.”

Donovan was young—he was called a “boy” in Maristown; but that term was often applied to men who had boyhood many years behind—and not bad-looking; a general favourite at the Hall, and in the village, and an object of much interest to several of the girls. But Donovan had his affections for a long time past—ever since he had school—and the object of his devotion was Nora Neil. He was not singular in his admiration; but there was something about the girl that had kept her admirers at arm’s length. She was always courteous, always pleasant with them all

there was a dignity and reserve about her which the other girls lacked, and which awed the young men. As often as not they called her "Miss," and not one of them, not even Donovan, who loved her best, had ever ventured to breathe a word of love to her. They worshipped her in secret and from afar. If Donovan's uncle in America had not been so obliging as to die, and, still more obliging, leave his money to Donovan, Donovan would, no doubt, have gone on loving Nora until the day of his death, and said nothing about it—to her, at any rate.

But money breeds confidence in all of us. With Meadow Farm in his hand, Donovan felt he could venture to approach his goddess.

He stood beside her, glancing at her admiringly from the corner of his eyes, his heart beating, all the things he was going to say getting jumbled up in his mind and blocking the way to each other on his lips.

"It's a—a fine day, Nora," he got out at last, covertly wiping the perspiration from his sunburnt face, and moistening his lips.

Nora assented—still with her eyes on the lake. She did not dislike Donovan by any means—indeed, she rather liked him. But she wished he would go and leave her free to get back to her dreams.

"It'll be a good harvest, if the weather lasts," he said.

Nora nodded.

"Sure, an' the farmers 'ull be makin' their fortunes," he said, after a pause. "'Ev yer seen the corn at the Meadow Farm, Nora?"

"No," she replied. "I have not been that way."

"Have ye not, now? Faith, it's a pretty sight. Perhaps ye wouldn't mind strollin' that way, and restin' your eyes on it, Nora?"

Nora wondered why he should want her to see the corn in Meadow Farm; but she replied, coolly enough, that perhaps she might stroll that way.

"Do, now!" he said, pleadingly. "I'm askin' you, because—well, I'm by way of takin' the farm, Nora."

She looked at him rather absently.

"Oh, yes," she said. "I heard of your good fortune, Donovan, and I'm very glad. I wish you luck."

"Do you? Then I'll get it, safe and sure!" said Donovan, devoutly. "But I haven't got it yet, Nora. The master—I'm maning Lord Esdaile—thinks I'm a bit wantin'!"

"Money?" she said. "I'm sorry—"

"No; it's not the money. It's something else. Can't you guess, Nora?"

The perspiration broke out on his forehead again, but he would not wipe it off. He did not want her to notice how flurried and nervous he was. Young as he was, he knew that the bold wooer has the best chance.

"How should I?" she said. "Is it because you are too young, Donovan?"

This was cruel, though she did not mean it.

"Faith, and that's a thing I can get by waitin'," he responded, with the Irishman's ready wit. "No, it's not that. I'm almost afraid to mention it to you—"

She looked at him questioningly, and with a faint interest, and, faint as it was, it encouraged him.

"You see, Nora, the Earl thinks as a farmer shouldn't be—that is to say— Faith, and he'd let me the farm if I'd got a wife to take into it."

Nora turned her eyes away, but with no suspicion of what was coming.

"Well, you need not wait long for that, Donovan," she said, with a smile.

"I'm glad to hear you say it!" he said. "And sure, I've got one in my eye already."

"Yes?" she said. "I'm glad to hear that, Donovan; and I hope she is a nice girl."

"She's the nicest girl in all the world!" he exclaimed. "The purtiest creature in all Oireland. There ain't such another in County Kerry."

Nora smiled absently.

"I wonder whether I know her," she said. "Is it Kitty Mahoney?"

"Kitty Mahoney!" repeated Donovan, with pained surprise. "Sure, an' I wouldn't be lookin' at the likes o' Kitty. Not but what she's a pretty young girl, Nora; but not— Ah, you're foolin'! Guess again."

"How can I, unless you tell me what she is like," she said, a trifle impatiently. "But you need not, if you do not like to, Donovan."

"What is she like?" said Donovan, glancing at her, then fixing his eyes on the lake, as if he never meant to take them off again. "Begorra, it isn't aisy to tell you. She's tall and supple as a corn-stalk, and she's dark, with eyes like the stars, an' her hair—what have you done with your hair, Nora, since I see you last? Sure, and it's cut off, it is!"

Nora flushed for a moment.

"It was hot, and—I cut it off," she said, coldly.

"The beautiful hair!" said Donovan, with sorrow in his voice. "But you'll let it grow again, darlin'? It's beautiful you are, anyways; but the hair that came down like a hill-stream—sure, it was a thousand pities!"

"Never mind my hair, Donovan," she said, quietly, but with the tone that always awed him. "Go on with your description."

He glanced at her nervously.

"And her hands are fine an' alim, like a born lady's, an' her voice—sure an' it's just music, mavourneen—"

"I can't guess," said Nora, breaking in upon him. "But I hope she will marry you, whoever she is, and that you will get the Meadow Farm, and be happy, Donovan."

"I hope she will; but I'm—I'm afraid, Nora!"

"Have you asked her?" said Nora, with a smile at his shyness and lack of courage.

"No," he said; "I haven't the pluck, you see. My heart's in my boots whenever I come near her, an' she's a way with her that sends the words down my throat again."

Nora smiled.

"You should not be afraid!" she said, absently. "Faint heart never won fair lady, Donovan. I must go now."

"Whisht! Wait awhile, Miss Nora," he pleaded. She sunk down again, reluctantly, and he pushed his hat from his forehead and thrust his hand into his short curls desperately.

"I'm for tellin' her now, now that you've given me leave."

"Given you leave!" said Nora.

"Sure, an' didn't you? And isn't it your swate self that I'm after lovin' with all the heart there is in my bosom, Nora!"

It was out at last, and he stood and gazed at her, his face flushed, his eyes pleading like those of a dumb animal.

She did not jump to her feet, or utter an exclamation of surprise; but sat perfectly still in her statuesque way. But her brows came down, and her eyes grew cold and hard. It was sacrilege, sheer sacrilege, for this man to talk of love to her. How dared he? To her, who was loved of Denis Denison!

Her silence alarmed him more than any outburst would have done.

"You'll—you'll spake to me, Nora," he said, in a husky whisper. "Sure, an' you're not wantin' to kill me for darin' to tell you that I love you, an'—an' want you to be my wife!"

Still she sat silent, trying to think of the best way to silence

him once and forever. That he should dare to love her! was the thought that predominated in her mind.

"Spake to me, Nora!" he said, after a pause. "I've angered you."

"No, Donovan," she said; "I am not angry; and I will promise not to be, if you will promise on your side never to—tell me this again."

His face went white.

"Who else will I be after tellin', then?" he said.

Nora's brow darkened.

"No one," she said, trying to make her tone something less hard than adamant. "You must tell no one, Donovan. What—what you ask is— Oh!" she rose with a gesture of impatience. "Why do you do it—say it? I have never—"

He understood her half-finished sentence.

"Sure, an' that you haven't," he assented, with eager humility; "not a word or a look from your beautiful eyes; not one! But I couldn't help lovin' you, Nora, all the same. You've been the girl of my heart ever since you were that high." He put his hand about a foot from the ground. "An' devil a word would I have said till I was dead and buried if—if it hadn't been for the money an' the farm! That's truth for you, Nora, my queen! Faith, I knew the difference 'twixt you an' me!"

"There is no difference," she said, in a low voice; "it—it is not that!"

"What is it, then, darlin'?" he enquired, anxiously.

"Just be after tellin' me, an' p'r'aps—"

"No—no," she said, "you would not understand! I am sorry, Donovan; very sorry—I—I never guessed. I thought it was some other girl. And—and—I thank you. Yes, it was kind of you to—to ask me. But I could not do it."

"It's a swate farm," he said, as if to himself, "an' a dacent house. I was thinkin' that Mrs. Neil would be after likin' the little room that looks over the bit o' park."

Nora flushed.

"Sure, an' of course, your mother would live wi' us, Nora," he went on, humbly, insinuatingly. "It's a lonesome place, the cottage, and she'd be after likin' the change well enough, I'm thinkin'. Come, Nora, my queen, don't be cruel to the lad as loves you wi' all his heart and sowl! Say ye'll mate wi' me, an' we'll be as happy as the day's long!"

She rose and looked, not at him, but the lake. She was pale now, and her lips were set straight.

"I cannot," she said. "I know how good you are—"



"Divil a bit o' goodness is in me at all, at all, but what you've put there—!"

"And—and I thank you for thinking of my mother."

"An' sure, and won't she be mine?" he slipped in eagerly.

Nora shook her head. "I cannot do it, Donovan."

"An' why not?" he asked.

It is the lover's cry. How is it that the girl he loves cannot love him in return? It is the unfairness of the fact that makes it so cruel.

"Because I do not love you, and never could," she hastened to add, as he opened his lips to plead with her. "Don't say another word, Donovan. Let us try and forget that—that you have ever spoken to me of—of this. We will go on being friends—if you like. I—I like you; I have always liked you."

"Sure, it 'ull grow into love, darlin', if you'll let it," he murmured.

She shook her head.

"Never! No, don't speak again. I am sorry."

He sighed a groan.

"An' the farm!" he said. "We'd have made our fortunes there, Nora! An' been as happy as two birds in a nest."

"I am going," she said, coldly. "You will find"—she hesitated a moment, but knew she must be cruel to be kind—"you will find some other girl, some one who will—will care for you, a better girl than I am."

"Don't be after talkin' foolishness, Nora!" he said, sadly.

"There's no other girl in all Kerry for me but you. An' if you won't have me, then—then, faith, all the rest may go to the divil, an' I'll take myself off to Ameriky."

"You won't do that," said Nora, pleading in her turn. "You won't be so foolish, Donovan, as to give up your chance, and leave Marishannon."

"It will break the heart of me, but I'll do it," he said, gloomily. "P'r'aps if I waited, now, Nora?"

She shook her head.

"No, no! It is once for all, Donovan."

"An' what makes you so hard-hearted?" he said. "Is it some other boy that's crept round you! Tell me his name, an' I'll—"

The blood rushed to her face, then left it white and stained.

"You've no right to ask me that, but I'll answer you, Donovan. There is no one else I—I am going to marry—"

"Then—!"

"But my answer is the same. I am going now. Never speak to me of this again, or--we must part here, friends no more, Donovan," she said, sadly. She did not wait for his answer, but passed him, and went up the path to the cottage.

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#### CHAPTER XIV.

MRS. NEIL was lying back in her usual chair, but her eyes were not half closed, as usual, and as Nora entered, she looked at her enquiringly.

"Who was that went down to the beach, Nora?" she asked.

"Donovan," said Nora, succinctly. She had no desire to give an account of the interview; she wanted to forget Donovan's proposal.

"Why did he not call in?" said Mrs. Neil; "he usually does."

"Perhaps he will do so now as he goes back," said Nora, as she took up some work and carried it just outside. She was an expert needlewoman, and her delicately-formed hands seemed made for the embroidery for which she was famous. But it was not always that she could do it. There was a touch of wildness in the girl's nature, a kind of restlessness which sometimes made the intricate work impossible and unendurable. She would stick to it for three or four days, perhaps, then throw it aside, and wander out as if she never meant to take it up again.

"Donovan is a good lad," said Mrs. Neil, musingly, her eyes resting for a moment on the lovely profile which she could just see. "Is it true that he came into some money lately?"

"Yes, it is true."

"Ah!" Mrs. Neil pondered for a moment. "He will be wanting to leave the Hall and go away."

"He is going to take Meadow Farm," said Nora.

"Meadow Farm!" echoed Mrs. Neil, in her low, subdued voice. "He will be marrying, then. He is young, but he is steady and trustworthy. She will be a lucky girl, and get a good husband, whoever she is. Is he sweethearting any one, Nora, do you know?"

Nora frowned. Her mother was not usually given to gossip, and it seemed strange that she should take to it that day—and about Donovan's affairs.

"I expect he has asked some one already, if he has applied for the farm," continued Mrs. Neil. "Who is it—do you know?"

Nora kept her eyes fixed on her work.

"Yes; he has asked me," she said, in her calm, self-possessed way.

Mrs. Neil started, and leant forward, with a touch of colour in her wan face. She knew, of course, that Donovan was in love with Nora, just as all the other young men were; but it had not occurred to her that he would have ventured to ask Nora to be his wife.

"He has!" she exclaimed. "I am glad—very glad!" She leant back and sighed.

Nora's brows came down.

"I am sorry," she said, laconically, as before.

"Sorry! Why? What—what did you answer him, Nora?"

"No!"

Mrs. Neil leant forward again, her colour coming and going.

"Surely not!" she said, with surprise and disappointment.

"Why did you say 'No'?"

Nora did not reply. It seemed to her quite an unnecessary question. Mrs. Neil looked at her with a troubled and anxious gaze. If the truth must be told, the mother was conscious of a vague fear of this beautiful child of hers. And yet no more dutiful and affectionate daughter than Nora could be imagined; but there had always been a kind of reserve between them; and the girl's strong, self-reliant nature had not been without its influence on the weaker one of the elder woman. Perhaps Nora's transcendent beauty and grace were also factors in the case.

"Oh, why did you refuse him, Nora?" Mrs. Neil asked, her voice tremulous. "Why did you do it? He is the best-looking lad is Marishannon. Is there a handsomer one anywhere?"

"Donovan is handsome—yes, mother," was the cold assent.

"And straight, and tall!" exclaimed Mrs. Neil; "and his character is very good. He will do well at the farm. Nora, how could you refuse him?"

A faint colour rose to the ivory of Nora's face.

"I do not—care for him, mother," she said.

Mrs. Neil made a gesture with her hand.

"Care for him! Why not? Are you refusing him for a mere piece of sentiment? Nora, I—I thought you were more sensible!"

BY DEVIOUS WAYS.

feelings, or to make you unhappy, but have you thought what will become of you when—when I am taken away!

"Don't think of it, mother," said Nora, in a low voice. "You are better—much better than you have been."

"I am a sentenced woman, Nora. I know it, and you know it, too. I may be carried off any moment. I do care—for myself. I am tired—worn out. But it is of no use to think. What will you do when I am gone, and you are alone in the cottage here? You cannot remain here by yourself, unprotected."

"Don't speak of it!" said Nora, with a shadow of gloom upon her face. "You are much better, stronger—you will not die, please Heaven, mother! Besides, I—I am not afraid."

"You are young and ignorant of the world," said Mrs. Neil, with sorrowful earnestness. "You do not know what you are talking about. You could not stay here alone."

"I am young—yes, and strong. I could work," said Nora.

"Work! Go out as a servant—" said Mrs. Neil. Her face flushed, and her worn hands moved restlessly. "It is not to be thought of. You could not endure it—you!"

"Why not? Better than marry a man I do not—!" said Nora, with a touch of bitterness.

She was thinking of Denis. She could not marry him, but she would marry no other, though the refusal meant starvation.

"You talk foolishly," said Mrs. Neil, with rising anger. "Where did you get such ideas? It is not for such as you to talk of love—love—love!—as if we were grand ladies. You have to think of the future."

"The future will take care of itself," said Nora, quietly. Mrs. Neil uttered a kind of moan.

"Be sensible, Nora!" she pleaded. "If you marry him, your future will be assured. You will have a good husband—a handsome, good man, devoted to you; you will be mistress of Meadow Farm; and—and I could die easy, for that you were provided for."

"You will not die for many, many years, mother, I am sure, and I am content to remain as I am," said Nora, in a low voice.

"Content! Content to live in this hovel, to roam the lake, to wear those clothes, to live like—like—You are foolish and wicked, Nora!" She dropped back in her chair and put her hands over her eyes. Nora laid down her head and went and stood behind the chair—perhaps so that her mother could not see her face.

"Don't cry, mother," she said, and her deep voice was low and like music. "I am neither foolish nor wicked; but I should be if—I married Donovan. Don't you understand, mother?" Her voice was almost inaudible, and there was a ring of pathos strange to it, for it was usually proud and self-reliant. "I don't love him, I never could love him—and it would be cruel to let him think I could!"

"Why not?" insisted Mrs. Neil, her feeble voice tremulous and impatient. "What more do you want? There is no one better off than Donovan who is likely to come courting you! There is no one so good-looking and so steady. You are flying in the face of Providence, Nora! You are so—so cold-hearted!" she added, sharply.

Nora grew scarlet. Cold-hearted! She remembered the beating of her heart, the waves of feeling that had swept over her as her lips had touched Denis's.

"I am not cold-hearted, mother," she said. "Though my heart is as ice to Donovan. Don't say any more. I am content to remain as I am—just Nora Neil, of the Lake Cottage. I wish there was no such thing as marriage—or—love in the world!" Then she caught up her voice, as it were, with a sharp sigh, as she thought of Denis.

Mrs. Neil opened her lips to carry on the argument, then stopped. Her sharp ears had caught the sound of footsteps.

"Go and see who that is!"

"It is Donovan," said Nora, without rising or looking up from her work. Mrs. Neil called out, "Donovan!"

"Mother!" said Nora, reproachfully; but Mrs. Neil called to him again, and he came round the path. He looked very wretched, and stood turning his hat in his hand, and with his eyes—after one pleading look at Nora—on the ground.

"Is that you, Donovan?" said Mrs. Neil, faintly. "Were you passing without looking in? That was not like you. Come in. Nora, give Donovan a chair."

Nora rose; but her face, impassive as a statue's, awed the lad.

"N-o, thank you kindly, Mrs. Neil," he said. "I must be after goin'. Don't—don't trouble, Miss Nora."

Nora stood upright as a dart, gazing above his head. He looked at her and sighed.

"Faith, and I'm late, Mrs. Neil, and I'll be gettin' back to the Hall. The good day to you, Mrs. Neil, and—and to you, Miss Nora!" And, with another pleading glance, he smiled miserably, and went on his way.

"The lad loves the ground you walk on," said Mrs. Neil.

"It's me I mind his loving," said Nora, rather cruelly. "I am sorry; but—let him go and say no more, mother."

Mrs. Neil leant back and closed her eyes, as if exhausted, and Nora resumed her work.

Donovan went up to the road slowly, and at the gate met Lady Esdaile. She had just got out of her pony-carriage, and was coming down the path.

Donovan took off his hat, and stood aside to let her pass; but Lady Esdaile stopped.

"Good morning, Donovan," she said, in her soft, refined voice. "I have not seen you to congratulate you on your good fortune. I do so now."

"Thank you, my lady," said poor Donovan, in a lugubrious voice, and with a mirthless smile.

"I am very pleased, because I am sure you will make a good use of it," said Lady Esdaile. "I hear you have applied for the Meadow Farm."

"Faith, an' I did, my lady," said Donovan. "But I'm thinkin' I'll have to call back."

"Indeed!" she said. She guessed from his woe-begone face and melancholy voice what had happened. "Why?"

Donovan thrust his hand into his short curls.

"Well, you see, my lady, things haven't turned out—bad cess to 'em!—as I'd expected, and I'm after goin' to the Earl an' tellin' him that I'll not be wantin' the farm after all."

"What will you do then?" asked Lady Esdaile.

"Ameriky, my lady, Ameriky; that's what it will be," said Donovan. "It's the place for the likes o' me, my lady."

"It is a grand country, yes; but I thought you were too fond of Marishannon to leave it," said Lady Esdaile, with that touch of sympathy which goes to the heart of the Irishman. Donovan felt something rising in his throat, which made his voice husky as he replied:

"That's just it, my lady. There's things in Marishannon that I'm so fond of that I'm by way of leavin' it."

Lady Esdaile smiled.

"I'm Irish, like yourself, so I think I understand, Donovan."

"Yes, my lady," he said, touching his forehead—he had kept his hat off. "She's refused to have anything to say to me." He heaved a sigh, and stared straight in front of him.

"You mean Nora Neil?"

"Sure, an' there's no one else," he responded, artlessly.

"You must not give up all hope so quickly, Donovan," she said.

He shook his head.

"Is it hope your ladyship's spakin' of? Divil a bit of that same—beggin' your ladyship's pardon!—has she left me." He was silent a moment, then he added, with nervous eagerness: "If—if your ladyship would only spake the word for me! Faith, there might be a wee bit o' hope for me then! She thinks so much o' your ladyship—begorra, which of us as doosn't?—an' she might listen to you; it's no listen to me, she will, an' little wonder! What's the likes o' me to her—the queen?"

Lady Esdaile looked before her as if she scarcely heard him.

"Well," she said, reluctantly, "I was going down to see Mrs. Neil. If—if Nora is there I will speak to her."

"God an' the saints bless your ladyship!" said poor Donovan. "Faith, an' it's an angel you are!"

Lady Esdaile shook her head with a smile.

"No, Donovan, I'm only a woman who understands a young girl," she said. "Good morning, and keep up your heart. You may get Nora and the Meadow Farm after all."

She went down the path, followed by Donovan's blessings, and stopped before the cottage. Nora rose, and Mrs. Neil hurried out of her chair, but Lady Esdaile motioned to her to resume her seat.

Nora got a chair and placed it beside her mother's, but Lady Esdaile still stood and looked at her. She had always taken a great interest in the girl, had always admired her. But this morning Nora's grace and beauty seemed to strike her in a new and strange way. She watched her almost painfully. Every movement of the girl's was graceful; she was not awkward or embarrassed by the presence of the great lady of Esdaile; indeed, though a faint colour rose to her face, was as self-possessed as Lady Esdaile herself—perhaps more so.

"How do you do, Nora?" she said.

"I am very well, my lady," said Nora. She waited until Lady Esdaile had seated herself, then went back to her own stool outside and her work.

"Are you better?" enquired Lady Esdaile of Mrs. Neil, in the familiar tone a great lady uses to a faithful servant.

"Yes, my lady," replied Mrs. Neil; "I am much better, but—I am a little weak to-day." The tears came into her eyes, which were lifted for a moment to Lady Esdaile's face, then cast down, and her hands shook. "It is very kind of your ladyship to come and see me."

"I should have been before, but we have had visitors,"

Lady Esdaile. She was still looking at Nora. The girl's

voice, as she had replied to her greeting, rang in her ears, and haunted her. It was so refined and musical—so unlike those of the other Marishannon girls.

"It has been very hot," she said to Mrs. Neil, "and you feel it, no doubt; and yet it is cooler here than at Esdaile. I am tempted to envy you this pretty cottage and beautiful view." She was talking to gain time. "What is Nora doing?" She rose, and went outside, and Nora stood up. "Why, child, you have cut off your hair!" said Lady Esdaile. "I thought there was something strange in your appearance! Why did you do that? It is a thousand pities!"

Nora flushed, as she had done before Donovan, but with a touch of shame in her downcast eyes. "It was very long and—and thick."

"You foolish girl!" said Lady Esdaile. She took the work from Nora's hands, and as she did so, noticed, not for the first time, their delicate shape.

"This is very pretty," she said. "I did not know you could work so well." She smiled. "I always thought you were too fond of the open air, and—rambling about."

"I do it in the open air, my lady," said Nora.

"Well, I would like to have it, if you are going to sell it," said Lady Esdaile; "but perhaps you would like to keep it?"

Nora looked faintly surprised.

"No, my lady; I shall sell it, if your ladyship will not accept it as a gift. It is too grand for such as me."

"I will buy it," said Lady Esdaile; "but thank you for offering it so prettily. I thought that perhaps you might like to keep it. It might not always be too 'grand,' as you call it."

Nora made no response, and Lady Esdaile, after a pause, said, "I have just met Donovan, Nora."

The colour flooded Nora's face for an instant, then left it pale. She stood perfectly still—did not fidget with her hands, or show any embarrassment.

"He looked very unhappy, poor boy. I hope you will not think less of him because he confessed the cause to me."

She did not speak, and Lady Esdaile, with a nervousness very unusual with her, continued:

"He tells me that—that he has asked you to marry him, Nora."

"Yes," said Nora. The word dropped from her lips slowly, reluctantly, but she did not blush, and still stood motionless.

"And that—that you refused him."



"Yes," said Nora again. Her brows came together, and there was a note of pain in her voice. It had been hard to listen to her mother; it was, strange to say, harder to listen to Lady Esdaile. The sweet, aristocratic face, the gentle, musical voice, went straight to Nora's heart.

"I am sorry," said Lady Esdaile. She did not ask her why Nora had refused.

"I am sorry too, my lady," said Nora, in a low voice.

"You do not care for him?" enquired Lady Esdaile, her eyes fixed on the girl's beautiful face with an almost painful intensity.

Nora shook her head.

"I do not care for him," she said; "I do not want to marry."

Lady Esdaile sat on the stool. "Sit beside me here, Nora," she said.

Nora sank down beside her, at a little distance, but Lady Esdaile motioned to her to come nearer, and Nora did so, leaning upon one elbow; graceful, and yet self-possessed and alert.

"I promised Donovan that I would—speak for him," said Lady Esdaile. "Perhaps that was foolish of me—" She paused, as if she expected that Nora would contradict her, but Nora did not speak.

"At any rate, I hope you will not be angry with me for—interfering, Nora."

"I could not be angry with you, my lady," she said, in a low voice, and with a tone in it that affected Lady Esdaile, and almost silenced her.

"But, you see, I am so much older, and I have seen so much of the world, and I—well, know how often a life is wrecked—how often the chance of happiness is missed, because—because we do not know our own minds. Think, Nora; he is a good, a fine young fellow. I think he would make a good husband; and that you would be happy."

"No, I should not be happy," said Nora, slowly, distinctly, as if she were communing with herself. Lady Esdaile almost started. The words, the tone, were so unlike those a girl of Nora's class would have used under the circumstances.

"You speak with certainty," she said. "Do you dislike him so much, Nora?"

"No," said Nora; "I do not dislike him; but—"

"Are you sure you cannot bring yourself to care for him? You are young; you cannot know what love means."

Slowly the crimson mounted to Nora's neck and face.

Lady Esdaile did not see it. She was gazing before her, thoughtfully, sadly.

"So few of us do, at your age, Nora. So few! That is why I have ventured to speak to you. You know that your mother—that I take a great interest in your mother; that I am attached to her by gratitude and affection. And I have known you ever since you were a tiny mite. You and Lady Blanche were babies together, my dear."

Nora's lips trembled and her head drooped. Something in the sad, gentle voice went straight to her heart. She wished Lady Esdaile would go, and yet longed for her to stay, both in the same breath.

"You and she are foster-sisters—"

Nora remembered the scene between Lady Blanche and herself, and sighed.

"—And so I have persuaded myself that I have almost a right to speak to you, to offer you advice. And I do advise you to—to consider. Do not refuse to give Donovan some little hope, Nora."

Nora bent her head. "I cannot!" she repeated, hoarsely.

She raised her head, and looked from side to side like a hunted animal. She had a presentiment, a dread, that pressure would be brought to bear upon her, that her mother—and, worse, this gentle-voiced lady—would persuade and persuade until—

She could resist her mother until the crack of doom, but this sweet-faced woman, this lady whom she had always regarded with a strange mixture of awe and love, would prove too strong for her.

"I cannot!" she repeated, hoarsely.

Lady Esdaile laid her hand, soft as thistledown, upon the beautiful head.

"Forgive me, my dear," she said, in a low voice. "It seems hard to you, but will you not think of it? You have had scarcely time yet to do so. Think not only of the present but of the future. If your mother—"

"I have thought," said Nora. "One can think a great deal in—in a few minutes. And I have thought. I cannot! I do not love him."

"Not yet," said Lady Esdaile. "But love may come."

Nora sprang to her feet, as if she could endure no more. She stood, her hand pressed against her heaving bosom, the other slightly outstretched, her eyes dark with conflicting emotions, and fixed on Lady Esdaile's face. Her delicately-cut lips were apart and tremulous.

"Never, never!" she panted. "Don't ask me. It—it is cruel! You—you spoke of Lady Blanche. She is your daughter. Would you talk to her like this? Would you advise her to marry a man she did not love?"

Lady Esdaile looked up at her with a face grown suddenly white.

"Would you?" demanded Nora, not angrily, but with a passion of pain in her eyes and voice. "I am only Nora Neil, your servant's daughter; a poor girl, and nothing—nothing. But if it was Lady Blanche, and your daughter, would you tell *her* to marry a man she did not love?"

Lady Esdaile half rose, then sank down again, trembling.

"No; you know you would not! You would not be so cruel. And why should you tell me to do so? I am a girl like her—I am not wood or stone. You are cruel—cruel!"

She covered her face with her hand and stood trembling, her bosom heaving. Lady Esdaile put out her hand and drew her towards her.

"Nora, Nora!" she said, in a voice broken with emotion. "Come to me. Forgive me; oh, forgive me, my child!"

Nora sank beside her and hid her face in Lady Esdaile's lap. The tears had come, and she was weeping profusely.

Lady Esdaile laid her hand on the girl's head. There were tears in her own eyes, and she could not speak.

Mrs. Neil rose from her chair, and stood supporting herself against the door. Her face was white, and her eyes were distended with something like terror.

"Nora, Nora!" she gasped. "Nora! Come at once!"

Lady Esdaile bent and kissed the girl's head.

"Go—to your mother, my dear," she said; and, rising, went with unsteady steps towards the path.

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## CHAPTER XV.

As Lady Esdaile passed through the gate to her carriage, Mr. Spencer Foyle happened to be passing. He stood aside politely, her ladyship inclined her head in acknowledgment of his courtesy, and without appearing to do so, he scanned her face. It was still pale, and she was still agitated. It was only a momentary glance he could manage, for she lowered her veil, as if she wished to hide her face.

Foyle passed on with the air of a man strolling without an object, but presently stopped and turned back, and, looking round to see that he was unobserved, went through the gate and down the path up which Lady Esdaile had hurried.

Warner had recovered sufficiently to take his departure from the Hall that morning, and was now being driven to his barracks, in the old-fashioned barouche with its pair of dark chestnuts, in which Lord Larry paid state visits and despatched his departing guests. Foyle had remarked that he too would, now that his "friend" was leaving, no longer intrude upon Lord Dennison's hospitality; but his host had refused to hear of his going.

"Faith, Mr. Foyle," he said, "it would be mean to desert me. You and I have been playing nurse, and now that our patient has gone, we ought to take a little holiday. If you are not bored to death, pray stay, and as long as you can!"

Spencer Foyle was rather bored; but the air of Marishannon was delicious, his health was improving, the Hall, with its boundless hospitality, was not a bad place to stop in, and the Earl—well, Lord Larry amused him. He decided he would stay another day or two, and the Earl had thanked him quite gratefully. Spencer Foyle had not forgotten Nora by any means; indeed, her beauty and grace, and, above all, her extraordinary self-possession and *sang-froid*, had produced a marked impression upon him. He resolved to see more of her, but he was too cautious to make his way to the cottage on the beach while Warner was still at the Hall, for that gallant gentleman might have heard of it, and would assuredly have chaffed him, and called the Earl's attention to the fact that, for all his "preaching," Foyle was not above paying attentions to the fierce young beauty.

But Warner had gone now, and the coast being clear, Foyle thought he would venture. He had a small sketching-book and a tube of sepia in his pocket, and going slowly down to the lake beach, he sat himself on a boulder and began to sketch the opposite hills. He was by no means a bad artist—that is to say, he could produce a rough and effective picture of the impressionist school—and he was so engrossed in his outline of the marvellous mountains which rose from the curving shore that he had almost forgotten the purpose of his visit to the spot.

But presently he heard Nora coming down the cliff path. He knew it was she, because of the lightness of the footfall, and its sureness and certainty; but he did not turn his head till she stopped suddenly on a piece of rock almost immediately above him. She had not seen him until she had got thus close, and his presence startled her. The sight of his thin, pale face, with its half-cynical smile, recalled the night of the duel. The colour rushed to her face for a moment,

and she stood, as if uncertain whether to go on her way or turn back.

Foyle raised his thin, fine brows as if somewhat startled, and lifted his hat.

"Good afternoon, Miss Neil," he said, in the tone in which he would have addressed a lady with whom he was slightly acquainted.

Nora inclined her head slightly, and would have passed on, but he arrested her steps with a request.

"Can you tell me where I could get a small cup or glass of water?" he asked, in the most respectful of tones.

"What do you want it for—to drink?" asked Nora.

He smiled and looked at her more openly. Her eyes were dimmed by the storm of tears, and there were shadows under them.

"Been crying," he said to himself. "And Lady Esdaile had also been weeping, if I'm not mistaken. There has been some sort of a scene. I wonder what about?" Then he looked down at his sketch. "Oh, no; you must not think I'm always thirsty. I want it to moisten the colour with which I am going to paint this sketch presently." He took out the tube as he spoke and held it up.

"I will get you some," she said, coldly.

"Please, no! I could not permit you to take so much trouble," he asserted, promptly. "If you will tell me where I can get it—" He half arose; but she made a movement with her hand to stay him.

She did not want her mother—still agitated by what had passed between her and Lady Esdaile—to be alarmed by the appearance of this strange gentleman.

"No, I will get it," she said.

Foyle watched her over his shoulder.

"She is beautiful enough for an empress," he murmured.

"There's some excuse for our young friend, Denis. Will she come back, I wonder? She did not look overcome with delight at the sight of me."

Nora filled a cup from the spring, and carried it down to him, and he watched her graceful form appreciatingly as it moved slowly down the rough, uneven path and over the huge boulders, and so surely that not a drop of the water was spilt. She held it out to him, and asked:

"Is that enough?"

"Plenty, oceans!" he replied, in his soft voice. "How can I thank you? It is all the more good of you to be so kind, Miss Neil, seeing that I must be always associated in

your mind with an—er—extremely unpleasant incident.” Again he spoke in the tone, and with the phraseology which he would have used to a lady, for he felt that they would not be thrown away upon, or passed unnoticed by her. Nora said nothing, but stood with her inimitable immovability; and he went on, before she could go: “You will be glad to hear that Captain Warner has left the Hall.”

A faint flush rose to her face.

“Why should I be glad?” she said, coldly.

He raised his eyebrows in a deprecatory fashion.

“Oh, if you ask me!” he said. “Well, he has been very ill, you know—it was rather feared that the gallant captain was going to send in his papers—die, you know—”

She winced.

“—And I thought you would be glad to hear that he has recovered, and is well enough to return to his important duties.”

She remained silent, her face turned away from him, and he went on slowly, indolently:

“At any rate, I am very glad. I did not want to figure in a murder trial—”

Her hand nearest to him closed, and her head became still farther averted from him.

“—With Mr. Denis Dennison in the dock. But there’s no fear of that now, and I am much relieved. I am also glad that I have the opportunity of begging you to believe that I very much regret the impertinence to which you were subjected that day, and that I had no part or lot in it. Will you accept my assurance?”

“It was not your fault,” she said, coldly, and in a low voice.

“Thank you. You have eased my mind of a heavy load, Miss Neil,” he said, with a sigh of relief. “I shall now endeavour to forget the whole business, as I hope you will. By the way, have you heard from Mr. Dennison?”

Nora turned upon him with swift suspicion and indignation.

“Have I—?”

“I beg your pardon,” he said, humbly. “I should have said, have you heard *of* him. I asked, thinking that perhaps some rumour of his whereabouts had reached you.”

“I have heard nothing,” she said, with a voice which she tried to keep steady of the tremor which his ears detected.

“Ah, well, I trust the little storm between him and his uncle will soon blow over, and that he will come back. He must be sorry to leave Marishannon; I am sure I shall be.”

“You are going?” she asked.

"Yes," he replied; "I have only a few days more, I regret to say. The place is so beautiful and the people so—er—charming that one is tempted to linger. What a lovely view this is! You must be very fond of it."

Nora inclined her head mechanically.

"You must be. Indeed, I can understand any one being quite content to live and die in Marishannon." He leaned back and looked at her with an innocent, ingenuous expression, and he saw her brows come down and heard the stifled sigh. "Not but what you must find it somewhat dull at times. In winter, now, it must be rather quiet and depressing. But perhaps you haven't felt it so?"

"Yes, I have," she said, unwillingly, as if the admission were dragged from her.

"Yes? I can understand. When one is as young and as full of energy as you are, Miss Neil, one dreams of the great world beyond, and feels tempted to long for a peep at it. One feels a little buried, and out of it, here in Marishannon."

His voice was slow, and soft, and listless, as if he were making these reflections as much for his own amusement as hers, as if he had no purpose, at any rate, in expressing them; but to Nora they voiced the aching of her own heart so plainly and eloquently that she could not suppress a sigh. It was as if he had read her mind.

"You have never been in London, I suppose?" he said, holding up the sketch to get a view of it, and apparently quite absorbed in it.

"No," she replied; "I have never been anywhere, have never left Marishannon since I was born."

"Dear me," he murmured, regarding her reflectively, "how delightful that sounds! And yet a little sad too."

"Why is it sad?" she demanded, coldly, almost defiantly.

He smiled deprecatingly.

"I was only thinking of all you had lost, were losing," he replied. "How kind of you to get me the water! I shall begin to colour this now. Would you care to look at it? But it isn't worth your inspection." He wanted to get her nearer, that he might see the effect, reflected in her speaking face, of his insidious words.

Nora hesitated a moment, then took a step nearer and looked at the sketch. It was the first picture in the course of its manufacture she had ever seen, and she was, as he knew she would be, greatly interested.

"It is pretty," she said. "But that hill—Maribole—is too high."

He was surprised at the quickness of her perception.

"Yes, it is," he said, with a smile; "but I raised it so as to throw a longer and deeper shadow on the water. The sketch looks better so, do you see?" He washed in the shadow rapidly and held the sketch up.

"Then you do not care whether it is true or not?" she said; then, before he could answer, she added: "What have I lost?"

He looked as if he had forgotten the remark that had called forth the question, then he said:

"Oh, yes! But perhaps you would not think you had lost anything. You would not care for a great city full of handsome houses—palaces, some of them—and shops. London is a wonderful place, with its churches and theatres and the rest of it. It is the most wonderful city in the world. And though it is so large, there is always room for more people."

Unthinkingly she sat down on the rock in a line with him, and resting her head on her hand, turned her dreamy eyes upon him.

"Heavens! what would some of the men I know give for you as a model, my dear!" he thought. "It is the city paved with gold," he went on aloud, slowly, listlessly, painting the while. "Fortunes are made there every week—I was going to say, every day. It is the place where everybody can find something to do, and some money to be made. And yet it is a city of pleasure. There is always something going on. Music all day long—in the parks and in the concert-rooms—and handsomely-dressed people moving about the beautiful streets. Oh, I can't give you an idea of it; but there is no place like London, Miss Neil. And, really, when I think of it, I can imagine it a good thing you have not seen it, or you would grow discontented even with Marishannon."

She was silent a moment, then she murmured, as if to herself:

"There is always something to do, some money to be made?"

He nodded. He could have smiled at the readiness with which she had risen to the gaudy bait.

"Yes, always. London is full of opportunities."

She sighed, as if she had reflected.

"That is, for men," she said, sadly.

"Indeed, no!" he said, with a soft laugh. "Your divine sex plays a most important part there, Miss Neil. There are thousands upon thousands of women who are earning their living in London."



She turned to him again with revived interest. The man himself repelled her, something in his voice, musical as it was, and his manner, gentle and soft as it was, impressed her unpleasantly; but his words fascinated her. She scarcely dared to entertain the hope, the aspiration, which they called up; it was as yet too vague even for her to realise it. But it was there, a tiny germ, and it was destined to grow.

He saw what was passing through her mind as clearly as if she were an open book before him, and the satisfaction at the evil he was working almost revealed itself in the gleam of his eyes, the faint curve of his thin lips.

"How—how do they work? What do they do?" Nora asked, still unwillingly.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"There are so many things a woman can do, and do as well, or better, than a man. For instance, there are some who paint pictures like, and far, far better than these."

"I cannot paint," she said, unguardedly.

The gleam flashed across his eyes again, but he went on as if he had not heard her.

"Some write—stories and novels; and some teach in schools and private families."

Her interest began to wane, and he added, quickly:

"But there are hundreds of other things women do. They act and sing at the theatres, and they make flowers—artificial flowers—such as are worn in ladies' bonnets, you know."

Nora nodded and looked at him again.

"And then there is needlework"—he saw from the corners of his eyes the quick light come into hers—"beautiful needlework, lace, and—and—"

"Embroidery," she said, below her breath.

"Yes; oh, yes; and some serve in shops, and sit as models."

She looked up as if she did not comprehend.

"Artists paint faces and figures, you know, and these girls—ladies—sit as models to them."

Nora's face grew cold.

"But there are a great many other things too numerous to mention."

He was silent a moment or two, giving time for his words to sink in; then he went on:

"And it isn't only a living they earn; you see, they learn so much. They see the world, and—er—raise themselves. No one is ashamed of working in London. You can do all that I have said and still be a lady."

"A lady!" she said, almost inaudibly.

"Yes, Miss Neil. No one in London asks where you came from or what you were. They take you for what you are. Now, you— But I beg your pardon!"

"Go on," she said, almost commanded. She was listening to him now, not only intently, but with an expression on her face which showed him the effect his honied account of London and its possibilities was producing upon her; and as he glanced at her he was conscious of a feeling of increased surprise. She did not gaze open-mouthed, or gaze at him with saucer-like eyes—as one of the village girls would most assuredly have done—but looked at him with her brows straight and her lips closed. It struck him that if he were an artist he would have liked to paint her, and call the picture "Thought," or, say, "Whither?"

"Oh, I was going to say, that if you were in London you could take your place at once; I mean that you would scarcely feel strange, because—well, because you would discover your value in the world."

"I did not know that I had any," said Nora, to herself again, rather than to him.

He smiled and shook his head.

"That is your modesty, and—forgive me!—your ignorance. You must think me very presumptuous, Miss Neil."

"No," she said, calmly. "I know that I am ignorant. I know nothing—nothing, except what I have read."

"I did not mean ignorant in the usual acceptation of the term," he explained. "Indeed, I should never have guessed that you had spent all your life in Marishannon. You speak—again you must forgive me!—as any other lady speaks."

"I am not a lady," said Nora, quite dispassionately. "If I do not speak like the—the other girls of Marishannon, it is because I was very regular at school, and I have"—she stopped suddenly, for she was going to say "have had Denis for a playmate"—"I have—my mother has spent most of her life with ladies."

"I can easily believe it," he said. "And, as I have said, you would not find yourself at all embarrassed in London—or elsewhere, for that matter. You think I speak with too much certainty, I can see by your face."

"Yes," said Nora, with her characteristic directness. "You speak as if—as if you knew me."

He smiled.

"I am somewhat of a reader of character, Miss Neil," he said, with great respect—"I have seen a great deal of men and women, both in the wilds and in the cities; and I have

learned to decipher their characters from their faces. It is not so difficult as you would think, I assure you."

"And you read in mine?" said Nora, turning her face to him with an absence of vanity and shyness which astonished him.

"Self-reliance, courage, a desire for a larger life, a strong resolution, and that—what shall I say?—spirit which enables a man—or a woman—to overcome all difficulties. If I were a fortune-teller—which I am not—I should prophesy great things for you. With all those characteristics, it does seem a pity—a great pity—that you should be buried in Marishanon, beautiful as it is."

She drew a long breath. He had stirred something within her; the desire to stretch her wings and fly away from the lake-hollow, above and beyond the hills around it, to that wonderful London in which she would find her place.

He heard the sigh, and changed the subject. He was too clever, too cunning a fowler to paint his decoy too brilliant a colour, or keep it too prominently in view. Enough had been done for to-day.

"Dear me," he said, glancing at his watch, "I had no idea it was so late. I must be getting back to the Hall, or Lord Larry will think I have fallen into the lake. I haven't finished my sketch, alas! I think I must come down to-morrow again. It will have to be the same time or the light will be different."

He got his painting materials together, and cleaned his brushes.

"Thank you so very much for the water! I will carry the cup up to the cottage."

"No," she said; "I will take it;" and with an inclination of the head, she rose and left him.

He did not watch her or follow her, but lit a cigarette and waited until she had got out of sight.

"The loveliest face I ever saw," he said, with a curve of his thin lips. "What a sensation she would make in London—properly dressed, with a diamond or two in that hair of hers! Pity she has cut it off—and yet I don't know. It gives her a—kind of Greek—gipsy—look difficult to describe. Yes, she would make a sensation! And it would not take much to get her there. Hem! Shall I go on with it, or not? If I don't, I must clear out before it is too late for me to draw back. Nora Neil has a trick of growing on one. Those wonderful eyes of hers have affected me already—and it takes a great deal to fetch me, as a rule."

## CHAPTER XVI.

NORA did not go straight back to the cottage, but set the cup down on the bank, and wandered along the narrow path on the side of the cliff. She felt strangely restless and disturbed; and, singularly enough, not so much because of Donovan's proposal and the scene with Lady Esdaile—she had, in a sense, almost forgotten them—but in consequence of Spencer Foyle's talk. She did not like him; she distrusted him, though she could not tell why; but his words, like seed dropped in fertile soil, were germinating in her mind. Was it true that she could find work in London, that she could raise herself to something higher than she was at present? Would it be possible for her—her heart beat fast as she put the question—to—to get nearer to Denis? It seemed improbable, impossible; and yet—yet—! Had she not read in books how women had done wonderful things, become rich and famous, and brought the world to their feet? Had Mr. Foyle been telling her untruths?

"Why should he?" she asked herself. He had spoken quite carelessly, lazily, as if he were talking for talking's sake.

London! She stopped and gazed over the lake with dreamy eyes. London was where Denis had gone. Perhaps—who knew?—if she were to go there, she would be near him. He should not see her; she did not want that. She would avoid him, even if they were to meet; but to be in the same place with him, to see the same sights, to breathe the same air!

To London! She shaded her eyes and looked at the sunset without seeing it. It was a great city she saw, with streets paved with gold, with women working and living real lives, not buried alive in out-of-the-way spots beside a great lake. If she could only be one of them!

In this vague longing for London there was none of the vanity and desire for pleasure and admiration which had filled Lady Blanche. Nora did not give a thought to her own beauty or the conquests she could make. She did not even think of pleasure. The theatres and music and beautiful dresses Foyle had dilated on did not appeal to her. What she saw in London was a place in which she could do some work, and raise herself from the lowly, useless position she occupied to a higher one.

But what could she do? She thought of her embroidery. Perhaps she could get work of that kind? If not, there were

other ways of earning a livelihood. She wanted so little; just enough to enable her to live and learn things, to be—well, like the women he had described.

Her heart beat quickly, and her bosom heaved under the stress of the new desire which Foyle's words had called into life. Then gradually her spirits sank. She could not leave her mother in her precarious health; she was not free.

In all probability she would have fought against the idea and crushed it down; but Fate was against her and on Spencer Foyle's side. When she got home, she found her mother moving about the room without assistance, and apparently stronger than she had been for years.

"Where have you been?" asked Mrs. Neil. "The tea is made—"

"You have made it yourself, mother?" said Nora, with surprise. "You are so much better?" For it was a long time since Mrs. Neil had even done so little.

"Yes," she said, shortly, as she moved to and fro with a kind of feverish energy. "I am weary of being a burden—"

"Mother!"

"—Yes, that is what I have been. I know it. But I must make an effort now. I must struggle against my weakness. It was bad enough to be so useless living here alone with you; but I should not wish to be a burden and a useless encumbrance at the farm."

Nora stared at her.

"What farm?"

"Meadow Farm," said Mrs. Neil, bending over the tea-pot. "Donovan has been here again. He dropped his handkerchief and came back for it—he has told me of his kind offer to give me shelter."

"But, mother—! It is impossible!" said Nora.

Mrs. Neil looked at her almost sternly.

"It is not impossible. Wait till you have heard me out, Nora, please. You have always been a dutiful girl—till now, and I count upon your obedience in this matter. If it had only been myself who thought it right and good for you to accept Donovan's offer, I might have yielded and said no more, might have let you throw away your chance—perhaps your only chance in life; but when Lady Esdaille wishes it, and actually comes to advise you—"

Nora's face paled.

"What is Lady Esdaille to me, mother?" she said.

Mrs. Neil set down her cup with a clatter, and shut her lips tightly for a moment.

"Lady Esdaile has been the best friend I—w<sup>e</sup>—have ever had. She knows the world, and what is best for you, better than you can do. But it is enough for me that she wishes it."

"She did not say so after—after I had told her I could not marry him," said Nora, in a low voice.

"Because she was upset and disturbed. She wished it. She had come down here to tell us so. That is enough for me; it must be enough for you, Nora."

"Why?" said Nora, with a quick breath. "I—I am not Lady Esdaile's slave! She is not my mother."

Mrs. Neil went to her chair and sank into it.

"I am tired," she said, wiping her forehead. "I cannot talk, argue with you. But you will have to think of what I have said, you will have to remember that Lady Esdaile wishes it—wishes it! And her wish is law to me."

"But not to me," said Nora, very quietly. "Not in this matter, mother. Don't—don't ask me!"

"Give me some tea," said Mrs. Neil, tremulously. "I cannot talk to you any more about it. You—you are stubborn and undutiful. Give me some tea!"

Nora's eyes filled with tears, but she forced them back. She could understand her mother's anxiety to please her old mistress in most things, but surely in this case she, Nora, ought to be considered. She waited upon her mother with her usual gentleness and care; but Mrs. Neil would scarcely speak to her. For the first time in their lives the two were antagonistic. There had never been a very warm affection between them; there had always been a certain reserve in Mrs. Neil's manner to the girl, and Nora had, so to speak, lived, in her dreams, an existence of which her mother knew nothing; but to-night the reserve grew into coldness and something worse; for Nora laboured under a sense of injustice. And that is a dangerous feeling for a young girl.

Nothing more was said that night. Once or twice Mrs. Neil rose and moved about the room in a way that astonished Nora, who did not know that her mother's illness had been in a great measure of that nervous kind which we call hysteria—a mysterious disease which disappears suddenly under unusual excitement or stimulant.

Nora slept fitfully that night, and lay awake thinking of London. But she fought against Spencer Foyle's influence, and she did not go near him when he sauntered down to the beach the next day.

He was not disappointed. He knew the struggle that was going on in her mind, and was quite sure that she would come

sooner or later. But he was out in his calculation, and Nora would not have come to him and spoken to him again if he had remained in Marishannon for a year, if—there is much virtue in an “if”—if Donovan had not come down to the cottage that afternoon.

Mrs. Neil welcomed him with barely concealed eagerness, and pressed him to stay to tea, and he stayed. But he got very little by it, for Nora scarcely spoke to him; and he very soon went up the hill sighing.

“Why do you treat him so?” demanded Mrs. Neil, querulously.

“Because, if I made him welcome—as you have done—he would think I—I had changed my mind. And I have not, mother,” said Nora.

“You must be mad!” said Mrs. Neil, fretfully. “He is everything that you could desire—as Lady Esdaile said.”

Nora left the cottage, and wandered down to the beach. She was beginning to feel hunted and harassed, just as the bird feels when the net is closing round it.

A kind of rage was beginning to smoulder in her bosom. She could not marry Denis, whom she loved; but no power on earth should make her marry Donovan.

The next day Foyle did not go down to the beach—and Nora was almost sorry; for it had been a trying morning for her, and she would have gone to him if he had been there. Her mother had sent her with a message to the Hall, and of course she had seen Donovan. He had walked back with her as far as the wicket gate, and, equally of course, had pressed his suit. And Nora had remained silent under all his eloquence—and if you want to know what genuine eloquence means, catch a young Irishman when he is in love.

She was silent because she could not trust herself to speak, for it was evident to her that all Marishannon knew of Donovan’s offer, and her heart burned within her. As she was leaving the Hall, Lord Larry had come out, and in his free-and-easy way—he was a “little father,” as the Russians say, to everybody in Marishannon—he had stopped her.

“So it’s you, Nora,” he said; then he paused, as if he had remembered Denis, and his handsome face had grown dark. “Confound the girl!” he muttered, quite loud enough for her to hear. “She’s lovely enough to send any young fellow out of his wits.” Then he said aloud: “So you’re going to marry Donovan, eh, Nora? Well, luck to you, my girl. And ask me to the wedding.”

Nora had flushed from neck to brow, but she looked at him

with eyes dark as violets with her emotion, and said nothing; and Lord Larry had gone on, and whistled to his dogs, with a puzzled expression on his face.

Everybody knew it, evidently. She almost hated Donovan.

That day passed. And the next, as she saw Foyle go down the path with his sketch-book ostentatiously in his hand, she followed him.

He looked up and raised his hat.

"How do you do, Miss Neil?" he said, with even more respect than he had conveyed in his tone the other day. "I have brought some water with me this time, you see!" He held up a small flask. "My sketch is almost finished, and I am leaving Marishannon very soon. What do you think of it? Please don't flatter me. I want your candid opinion."

She looked at the sketch. She had scarcely looked at him, as Foyle had been quick to notice.

"It is very pretty, but it is not at all like it," she said, indifferently.

"Really! You almost persuade me that I am an artist, Miss Neil," he said, with a cynical smile. "To make a portrait or a landscape attractive without being like it, is the truest of true art. And you like it?"

"Yes," said Nora, absently.

"Then I am going to be so bold as to ask you to condescend to accept it," he said. "I should like you to take it as a souvenir"—he stopped in time—"I mean as a mark of my regret for the incident which attended our first meeting. I am going to London—"

She broke in, not quickly but firmly:

"I wanted to ask you, do you think—you said that girls, women, could earn their living in London—do you think I could?"

"Most assuredly," he said, dipping his brush into the cup of the flask. "No one better, I should say."

She stood beside him, her eyes fixed on the sheen of the lake, and scarcely conscious of his presence. He glanced up at her, and quickly began to make a rough sketch of her on the edge of his block.

"You are sure?"

"Quite sure," he replied, lightly. "But of course you do not think of going?"

"I do not know," she said, slowly and vaguely, as she watched a seagull skim over the water.

He stroked his moustache to hide his smile of satisfaction.

"If you were only there, you wouldn't need to ask the



question," he said, painting as he spoke. "If I may say so, London is the place for such as you, Miss Neil. Simply *the* place. We are all so tired and way-worn, that any one fresh and full of energy would be more than welcome."

"I should not know where to go, if I went," she said, her eyes fixed on the lake.

He grew suddenly grave, as if the thing he had expected had come more suddenly than he had dared to hope.

"I can tell you," he said. "There is a woman—a lady I know who would take you in as a lodger. I'll give you her address. I'll write it down for you."

He tore a leaf from his pocket-book, and wrote an address, and gave it to her.

She took it and read it with the same dreamy expression.

"Thank you," she said; and, to his surprise and disappointment, left him without another word or glance.

With the address hidden in her bosom, she went straight back to the cottage. The idea of flight was, as yet, scarcely more than a suggestion; but Fate, or the devil, was against her, and as she neared the cottage, she heard voices. One was her mother's, the other Lady Blanche's.

Lady Blanche was speaking as Nora stood on the threshold, and she heard these words distinctly:

"I warned you the other day, Mrs. Neil, and you were inclined to resent my warning. Well, all I can say is that your daughter is in the habit of meeting a gentleman on the beach—"

"It isn't true!" gasped Mrs. Neil.

"Oh, yes, it is," declared Lady Blanche. "I've heard it from several people. Donovan's complained about it. Poor Donovan! He's a perfect fool about your daughter. I really pity him. But I've seen her myself. She's down there with him now. It's the Mr. Foyle I mean who is staying at the Hall—"

Nora waited for this much, then entered the cottage.

Mrs. Neil was standing, apparently quite recovered, by the table, and Lady Blanche was seated in the arm-chair.

They both looked up at Nora as she entered, Mrs. Neil with an anxious, troubled air, Lady Blanche assured and confident.

"Nora," exclaimed Mrs. Neil, "is—is this true?"

"Is what true?" asked Nora, with her statuesque calm.

"Oh, she'll deny it!" said Lady Blanche, with a sneer.

"They always do!"

"Have—have you met this gentleman—Mr. Foyle, who is

staying at the Hall—as Lady Blanche says?” demanded Mrs. Neil.

Nora looked from one to the other in silence, then passed into the inner room.

“I told you so!” exclaimed Lady Blanche, rising and shaking her skirts triumphantly. “She hasn’t a word to say. So much for your ‘good girl,’ Mrs. Neil! If you’ll take my advice, you’ll marry her to Donovan as soon as possible.”

Nora appeared at the door of the bedroom, her face pale and set.

“Do you dare—!” she exclaimed, her breath coming in short, sharp pants.

Lady Blanche stared at her insolently.

“I leave your mother to deal with you,” she said, as she left the cottage.

Nora went into her room and shut the door.

Yes, Fate was against her. Marishannon was no place for her any longer.

She sat on the edge of the bed, and stared before her vacantly for some time; then she went to a drawer and took out a purse. It was quite a common thing, made of mole-skin, and presented to her by some admirer. It contained just enough to pay her fare to London.

To London!

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## CHAPTER XVII.

NORA lay awake all that night. It was a terrible thing for a young girl to fly from home, to leave her mother, she knew; but something within her said that it would be more terrible to stay and be forced into a marriage with a man she did not love, and whom, if she married him, she should quickly loathe. And Lady Blanche’s taunt and insult had proved the last straw which had made the load unbearable.

She rose the next morning at daybreak, and as quickly as possible lit the fire, laid the breakfast things, and placed her mother’s chair in its position beside the door. Then, as noiselessly, she went back to her room and took out her best clothes. They were simple and plain, as befitted her position, but they were well cut and nicely made, for Nora was clever with her needle when she could bring herself to use it. The dress and jacket had only been worn once or twice, and the plain straw hat, with its neat trimming of ribbon, and the simple upright feather which she had found on the beach, were new.

When she had dressed and packed a small hand-bag with a change of clothes, she sat down and wrote a letter to her mother. It was only a few lines, saying that she had been obliged to go; that she was going to London to earn her living, and that she would send her mother all the money she possibly could, so that Mrs. Neil could live on at the cottage until Nora had made a home for her. A tear or two dropped upon the paper when she implored her mother not to judge her too harshly and to forgive her. And would her mother explain to Lady Esdaile, and ask her to forgive her also? The letter she addressed to Mrs. Neil, and she intended posting it at Cork, so that her mother could not get it until pursuit would be useless.

Then she put the slip of paper Foyle had given her in her purse with her little store of money, and stood on the threshold of the door—not hesitating, but calling up all her courage; for now that the supreme moment had come, she began to tremble and feel frightened. If she could only have gone into her mother's room and kissed her good-bye, it would be less hard for her to go; but she dared not risk it. As she paused outside Mrs. Neil's room, she could hear her mother's regular breathing; and with a whispered "Good-bye, mother!" she went softly down the stairs, looked round the little room which spelled "home" to her, and then passed out into the open air.

It was hard to part from the cottage, it was harder still to leave the lake. She glanced down at the boulder on the beach where she had sat with Denis, and a lump came into her throat, and the tears rose to her eyes; but she swept them away with a swift movement of her hand, and, setting her teeth hard, went quickly up the path.

They do not rise very early at Marishannon, and there was little chance of her meeting any one; but if she should do so, she could say, if she were asked where she was going, that she was going to the nearest town. But few of the villagers would have the courage to ask her; Nora was not the girl people were ready to question. As for Mrs. Neil, she would not be alarmed till nightfall, at any rate, for Nora was often away the whole day, wandering about the lake shores or through the woods, and Mrs. Neil would have no suspicion of actual flight.

She met no one as she went through the village, and she walked along the road with her quick, firm step, and with her head erect, feeling, as each moment lengthened the distance between her and Marishannon, as if her courage were increasing and her resolution growing firmer.

She reached the cross-roads some time before the coach was due, and she went into the woods to sit down and wait, out of sight of any chance passer-by. This was the worst part of the business—the waiting; but the time passed, and she heard the horn at last.

There was no passenger on the coach, and the guard, who did not know her—looked with some surprise at the young lady—for it would have required more discrimination than he possessed to discover that the refined-looking girl was simply a peasant—who emerged from amongst the trees and hailed him. He touched his hat respectfully, and helped her up to the box seat, and with a tootle on the horn, the coach started again.

It was a lovely morning; the four horses spanked along merrily, and the soft breeze ruffled. Nora's short curls and brought a touch of colour to her pale cheeks.

No Irishman is silent for very long, and presently the coachman glanced at her with his bright eyes.

"An' are ye goin' far now, miss?" he asked, respectfully.

Nora knew that concealment would be of no use, and replied at once:

"To London."

He whistled softly.

"That's a long way, miss. An', axin' your pardon, where might you have come from?"

"From Marishannon," said Nora at once.

He looked at her with increased interest.

"Then you're from the Hall; a visitor, most like?" he opined.

"No," said Nora.

With national courtesy, he did not press the question.

"I was thinkin' that you might know Master Denis, of the Hall," he said, apologetically. "He travelled wi' us a little while ago."

Nora tried to keep the colour from her face.

"A broth of a boy, Master Denis!" he said, enthusiastically. "He druv the whole way, an'" —with a chuckle— "pretty nigh druv an old gentleman, too—out of his mind wi' froight. Master Denis was goin' to London too. Maybe you'll see him, ma'am?"

"It is not likely," said Nora.

"Faith, an' that's a pity!" he remarked. "For he's worth beholdin', is Master Denis. P'r'aps you've his acquaintance, ma'am?"

"I—I know him—yes," said Nora.

"Goin' to seek his fortune, he said," he went on. "Good luck go wi' him, says I."

Nora mentally cried "Amen!" The man's artless talk of Denis warmed her heart and raised her spirits. Who knew? Perhaps she *should* see him.

The fact of her knowing "Master Denis" raised her still higher in the esteem of the coachman, and he treated her "like a lady," arranging the dust-cloth over her, placing an extra cushion at her back, and pointing out the beauties and lions of the way. As they neared the town, other passengers got up, but they were, of course, strangers to Nora and caused her no apprehension. They drove up to the station, and the guard helped her to alight and showed her where to obtain her ticket. Though it was only a small station, Nora felt strange and nervous, but she looked calm and self-possessed enough, followed the porter, and took her seat in the train as if she had been accustomed to travelling all her life.

But when they reached the terminus at Cork, with its bustle and confusion, its ringing of bells and clamour of porters and car-drivers, she began to realise that her journey was a greater undertaking than she had expected. To her, who had never before seen even a third-class city, Cork appeared enormous and awe-inspiring; but it also looked squalid and dirty. However, she consoled herself with the reflection that London would be very different, and she sighed with relief when she found herself on board the boat.

Just before embarking, she had inquired for a post-office, and had dropped her letter to her mother into the box; and it seemed to her that by the simple act she had cut the last link that bound her to Marishannon. From that moment her new life began.

The size of the steamer amazed her, and the noise and confusion, and the multitudinous smells—for hundreds of cattle were on board—bewildered her; but already she was learning the art of concealment, and none of her fellow-passengers, who regarded the lovely, solitary girl with admiration and curiosity, suspected how fast her heart was beating.

From Cork to Bristol took twenty-two hours, and, fortunately for Nora, the time was a pleasant one instead of the horror it sometimes is, for the sea was so calm that the boat sailed on an even keel. She made her way, before the vessel started, to a snug corner near the bow, and there she sat through the soft summer night, with the starlit sky above and the sea all phosphorescent below her; thinking of Marishannon, of her mother—and of Denis. Long before dawn she

began to feel hungry, for she had had nothing more substantial to eat than a cake and a cup of milk, at the station refreshment-bar, since she had left home; but when the breakfast-bell rang, she shrunk from going down to the saloon; and still sat in her nook, struggling with the faint feeling which was altogether a new sensation, and an extremely unpleasant one.

Two or three persons in their march up and down the deck passed her, but took no notice of her; but presently the first mate came by, in the execution of some duty in that part of the vessel, and after remembering that he had left her in the same spot when he turned in for the night, stopped and touched his cap.

"Had your breakfast, miss? No? Is there anything I can get you?"

Nora gratefully accepted the offer, and he brought her a cup of coffee and some bread and butter, and stood beside her talking in a friendly way for some moments. He sought her again when they arrived at Bristol, helped her to reach the gangway, and directed her to the station.

Bristol is larger than Cork, and Nora felt that she was becoming acquainted with cities by degrees. The terminus filled her with amazement, but she managed to conceal her astonishment and got into the train, unassisted this time. Just before the train started, she bought a newspaper and read it as they went along. It was the first London newspaper, she had seen, and its size and the number and variety of its advertisements had their effect upon her. She read column after column of the "Situations Vacant" and "Situations Wanted," and was struck by the number of the latter. But still she had no suspicions, no misgivings, and still believed in Spencer Foyle's description of London and his assurance that there was plenty of work there for everybody.

The train was an express, and it rattled into Euston well on time. Nora got out and made her way along the platform and into the street. And there, at once and in a moment, London struck her the blow which it always strikes those who see it for the first time.

She stopped in the Euston Road and looked round her in speechless amazement. Clouds—or smoke—obscured the sun, the sky was a thick, yellowish grey, and the mass of houses seemed to rear itself threateningly and to block her progress. She had never dreamed, imagined, anything like it, and she stood and gazed about her, confused and bewildered. Heaven alone knows what she had pictured for herself; but this, the

reality, simply stunned her. She saw rows and squares of houses, all apparently alike, begrimed with soot and stained with sun and rain. The Euston Road is not the most crowded part of the metropolis, but to Nora it seemed thronged with people. She wondered where they were all coming from, where they were all going, and why they were all hurrying. In Marishannon everybody went slowly, not to say lazily, but here, in this great city, every man, woman, and child hurried along as if they had not a moment to spare.

Then the noise! The omnibuses and cabs and vans clattered over the stones, the drivers and conductors shouting; costermongers, with their barrows, yelled their wares, newspaper boys shrieked the contents bill, children screamed and screeched as they played in the gutter. Nora felt deafened by the row, and unconsciously put her small brown hand to her head as she walked towards that big thoroughfare, the Tottenham Court Road. When she had arrived at the corner, she stood for a moment or two looking at the traffic—which was much larger and noisier than in the road she had left—and asked herself where were the parks, with the beautifully-dressed ladies, and the theatres and concert-rooms Spencer Foyle had told her of.

She walked down the big road and reached Oxford Street, where the traffic grew still thicker, the people more numerous, the houses still closer together. The row of shops, with their windows crowded with costly goods, attracted her attention; and she stopped now and again and looked at them. She was too excited to feel tired or hungry, and she had reached Regent Street before it occurred to her that it would be wise to find the address Spencer Foyle had given to her.

At the corner, where Regent Street crosses Oxford Street, she drew back into the doorway of a shop, and took out her purse to get the slip of paper. As she did so, two men passed her, glanced at her, exchanged a look with each other, and stopped in front of her.

"Can you tell me the way to Westminster Bridge, miss?" asked one, while the other sidled close to her.

Nora shook her head.

"No," she said; "I am sorry I cannot; but I am a stranger—"

Before she could get any farther, the man who had sidled up to her stretched out a grimy hand and seized her purse; and the next moment the pair had darted off.

Now, everybody in Marishannon is honesty itself. There are no robberies there, and a thief of any kind is a thing un-

known. It was quite twenty seconds before Nora realised that she had been robbed; then she uttered a cry, and started after the men. But before she had gone a hundred yards they had darted up a side street, and she lost sight of them. She ran up the street; but they had disappeared as completely as if the pavement had opened conveniently and swallowed them up.

She stood, pale and panting, and so palpably agitated, that a policeman, sauntering along, stopped and regarded her curiously.

"What's the matter, miss?" he asked, gruffly, but not unkindly.

"I— There are thieves in London!" she said, indignantly.

The man stared, and then smiled.

"There is! I should think so!" he said. "What have you lost?"

"My purse," said Nora, trying to speak calmly. "I had it in my hand, and two men asked me the way—"

"And grabbed it," he finished for her. "You ladies will carry your purses in your hands, or else in a pocket in the back, where anybody can get at it. Which way did they go?"

"Up there," said Nora.

He looked up the narrow street, and shook his head.

"Too late," he said. "They've got off right enough. Was there much in it?"

"Only a few shillings; but it was all I had, except—"

She drew out the change of half a sovereign which she had received from the first mate.

The policeman nodded.

"You're a stranger in London?" he said, scarcely interrogatively, for Nora's accent betrayed her.

"Yes," said Nora. "But—but it is not the money I mind so much. There was a paper in the purse—the address of the place I was going to."

The policemen looked sympathetic, but as if the case was by no means a novel one.

"I'm afraid they've got off—clean got off, miss," he said.

"Can't you remember the address?"

Nora put her hand to her head and tried to remember. She had only glanced at the paper when Foyle had given it to her, and one line only remained in her memory.

"It was somewhere in Chelsea," she said. "If you will tell me the way there, I shall find it, I dare say."

The policeman smiled pityingly.



"Chelsea is a large place," he said. "There are hundreds, thousands of houses in it. You might hunt all day, a week, a year, and not find the one you want. Can't you remember the street? That would be something."

Nora shook her head.

"No; I cannot. It has gone—quite gone. The—the crowd and the noise have driven it out of my head."

"Up from the country, miss?" he asked, sympathetically.

"Yes; from Ireland. I only reached London to-day," she replied, her brows knit, her lips set tightly.

"Ah, yes," he responded. "You generally loses your purse the first day. It's kind of natural. After that, you looks sharper. Well, you'd better come to the police station the state your case."

Almost mechanically Nora accompanied him to the station. The inspector in charge was a pleasant-faced man, with daughters of his own, and he listened attentively and sympathetically; but at the end of the narrative, he said, gently enough:

"I'm afraid your purse has gone for good, miss. We'll do our best, but— If you're in want of money—" and he put his hand in his pocket; for her beauty and helplessness, and more, her evident innocence, had their proper effect upon him.

"Oh, no, no, thank you!" said Nora, quickly, and with a scarlet blush. "I have some money; see!" and she showed him the silver still remaining. "It is the address I want so badly."

The inspector carefully directed her towards Chelsea, and Nora left the office.

Notwithstanding the policeman's discouraging assertion, she still hoped to find the house to which Foyle had sent her, and she walked on, pale and disheartened, but in nowise despairing.

By dint of repeated enquiries she reached Chelsea, to find a labyrinth of streets, a solid mass of houses. She realised that it would be impossible for her to find the particular one to which Foyle had directed her, and she turned away from the confusion of streets and squares, and made her way back to the Embankment.

Perhaps the river, though it rushed yellow and forbidding, reminded her of Marishannon and exerted an influence over her because it was water. Anyway, she found a seat, and sank down upon its cold stoniness with a sense of relief. But presently a policeman came along.

"Can't sit here," he said, sternly. "Move on!"

She rose with an indignant flash of her eyes and walked on.

She was beginning to feel tired; and before long she felt exhausted, and stood leaning against one of the young trees of which Londoners are so proud. But there was no rest for her. Another policeman sauntered up.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded. "Come, move on!"

Nora held her tears in check till he had passed, then they burst forth. Was this the London Mr. Foyle had described? How cruelly he had deceived her! In the vastness of the great city her solitariness and helplessness were increased tenfold. In Marishannon she could have coiled herself under a tree or behind the shelter of a rock and slept the sleep of peace; but here, even rest was denied her. If the cruel policeman would only let her sleep on one of the benches she would be content!

Every now and then men and women passed her; the men, some of them in evening-dress, the women in gaudy attire, and both men and women laughing and merry. And, at intervals, a tramp—like herself—wearied and footsore, with drawn, haggard face and dull eyes, looking at nothing but the pavement.

Once, as she paced slowly on to nowhere, a man looked at her, paused, and spoke to her. She did not hear what he said, but something in his voice or his manner made her quicken her steps. The fear he caused, or her exhaustion, brought her to a standstill beside some railings, which she clutched desperately, and to which she clung for support. A roar—it was the roar of the Strand, with the people coming out of the theatres—rang in her ears. She felt overwhelmed—as a drowning man feels when the waves are dashing over him—and as she clung to the railing, she uttered a cry, a cry of despair, and slipped down to the pavement.

She was fainting literally from exhaustion and want of food, and in a few moments she would have been found by the ubiquitous policemen and carried off to the station; but it chanced that as she slipped to the ground a young girl came hurrying up.

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## CHAPTER XVIII.

SHE saw Nora fall, and, with a glance of pity, was passing on, when Nora moaned. The girl stopped, hesitated, and then went on. Before she had gone half a dozen steps, she paused again, stood for a moment or two uncertainly, then went back.

"What is the matter?" she asked, bending over Nora.

Nora raised her head, and the girl gave a little start of surprise at the sight of the beautiful face.

"I—I don't know. I am very tired," Nora managed to say.

The girl stood upright and eyed her keenly, with the keenness of a born Londoner, always on the alert for imposition of any and every kind.

"Tired! Why don't you go home?"

Nora struggled to her feet, and drew her hand across her eyes.

"I cannot. I—I have no home."

"Oh, come now, don't you know," said the girl, incredulously, "everybody's got a home?"

"Yes," said Nora, with a sigh, "I have one—I had forgotten. But it is far from here—in Ireland."

The girl stared at her.

"In Ireland!" she said. "You don't expect me to believe that—I beg your pardon," she broke off, for Nora had looked at her with a half-indignant, half-angry look in her weary eyes. "And you've got a bit of the brogue, too. But do you mean to say you haven't any place to go to—here in London?"

"Nowhere," said Nora. "I came from Ireland only this morning, and I have lost the address of the place to which I was going."

The girl still looked rather incredulous, but something in Nora's voice and manner—perhaps the beauty and refinement of the face—were slowly taking effect on her.

"Well, it's a queer story," she said, "and if it's a plant, you do it very well—stunningly!"

Nora did not know what a plant had to do with her misery, but she grasped the meaning of the strange sentence, and smiled almost bitterly.

"Why should I tell you a lie?" she said. "Thank you for speaking to me. Good night," and she moved away. The girl stood and looked after her with a puzzled and hesitating expression, and gnawed her lip softly. Then, before Nora had wearily dragged herself a dozen steps, the girl went after her, and touched her on the arm.

"Look here," she said, "I can't make you out; anyhow, I can't go away and leave you. Whatever you are, and wherever you came from, you seem down on your luck and as if you weren't used to tramping."

"But I am," said Nora, innocently. "I can walk—"

The girl made an impatient gesture.

"Lord, how green you are—or pretend to be!" she added, under her breath. "Look here; there's no place for you but the work-house."

"Where is that?" asked Nora.

The girl stared at her.

"It's lucky for you you don't know," she said. "You wouldn't like it, if you went there. So you'd better come home with me."

The colour rose to Nora's pale face.

"Come home with you? Why—why should you ask me?"

"Well, I'm blest if I know," said the girl, candidly. "If anybody had told me that I should offer to take a stranger—and a woman—! But there's something about you that fetches me, and I couldn't go home and leave you, and feel comfortable. So come along."

Nora still hesitated; but the thought of shelter, of companionship, made her weary heart beat with sudden warmth and hope. To get out of these hideous streets—anywhere, anywhere—would be a joy too great for words!

"I do not like to," she said. "It is very kind, and you are very good; but—but—you don't know me. You do not believe me, I can see."

The girl eyed her curiously.

"Well, you don't know me, for that matter; and as to believing you, I expect I shall believe anything if I look at you much longer. Come on."

"Yes, I will come," said Nora, and she walked beside her.

They left the Embankment and turned into the Strand. The crowd frightened Nora, and she laid her hand timidly on the girl's arm. Her companion looked at her with surprise and curiosity.

"I believe you're scared," she said. "Well, London's enough to frighten anybody that isn't used to it. But we shall be in the 'bus directly. Here we are. Get in!"

She almost pushed the hesitating Nora into an omnibus, and conversation being difficult, not to say impossible, in that noisy but convenient vehicle, they remained silent until the girl stopped the 'bus and got out.

"It's not far now," she said. "Here; take my arm. You're dead beat, I can see."

Nora took the proffered arm, and they went down Southampton Street, past Russell Square, and into one of the back streets.

Nora looked round her dully. One street in London seemed

like another to her; there were the usual rows of houses on each side, all similar, and all grimy and forbidding. She wondered how every one could possibly find his way home, or distinguish one house from another.

The girl stopped in front of one of the houses, and taking a key from her pocket, unlocked the door. Then she struck a match, lit a candle standing on a bracket, and went up the narrow stairs, calling to Nora to follow her. The passage, the house, smelt close and stuffy, and Nora drew her breath painfully, asking herself how people managed to breathe in this airless place.

The girl opened a door and stood aside for Nora to enter. She saw a small room, with a bed in one corner; but the room was evidently used as a living-room, for there were a table with a white cloth upon it, and some cooking utensils on a paraffin stove placed on the ordinary grate. The room was littered with dresses and feminine belongings, and a pier-glass stood in one corner. It was the most important article of furniture after the bedstead.

The girl lit a paraffin lamp, and drew an old but comfortable chair forward.

"Now you sit down for a minute while I light the stove," she said. "You'd better take your hat and jacket off. Put your bag down, and try to make yourself at home."

Nora did as she was told, and watched her hostess, as, with the ease and rapidity of long practice, she lit the stove, set on the kettle, and got a loaf of bread and some things from a cupboard. Nora, now that she was free to look at her, and by the aid of the lamp, saw that the girl was young—as young, she thought, as herself—and almost pretty. She had a pleasant little face, with dark eyes and hair; but the face owed its charm—for it had one—to the vivacity of its expression. The eyes were small and full of spirit and quickness, and the lips wonderfully mobile. Nora noticed that there was something on the face, something peculiar, and it puzzled her. She did not know that it was powder and grease-paint only partially wiped off. Altogether she felt attracted by the girl, and, for all her ignorance of the world, felt that the face was not that of a bad woman.

The owner of it, meanwhile, busied herself at the stove, and very quickly placed a pot of tea on the table, and some rashers of bacon.

"Now you come and have your supper," she said, cheerfully and briskly. "Don't tell me you're not hungry, and couldn't eat, and all that."

"No," said Nora, with a faint smile; "I will not, for I am very hungry, and could eat anything!"

"That's all right," said the girl. "I was afraid you'd gone too long, and I should have a fuss with you."

"I am giving you a great deal of trouble," said Nora, flushing.

"No, you're not. And don't you mind my sharp way. It's the London style, and doesn't mean anything; but I can see you ain't used to it. Would you like a little brandy in your tea? I've got some."

Nora declined promptly but gratefully.

"Very well; perhaps you're right; though I'm not sure it wouldn't be the best thing for you," she said, as she helped Nora.

No one who has not fasted for many hours can understand how good that cup of tea and piece of bacon were to Nora; and she ate and drank in silence, but with a gratitude which displayed itself on her face.

"Better now?" asked the girl, who had taken her meal in the intervals of making up the bed and an attempt at tidying the room.

"Much better," said Nora, with a smile.

"Then go on with the medicine as before," said the girl, promptly, and she cut another slice of bread and refilled Nora's cup. Then she sat down, and leaning her small face on her hands, looked at Nora. "My name's Dora Moberley; what's yours?" she asked, suddenly, but not roughly.

Nora hesitated and coloured, and before she could reply, Dora shot in quickly:

"Look here, you needn't tell me unless you like. It isn't always convenient to give your right name. Mine, for instance, isn't Dora, and it isn't Moberley, either. It's only the name the public knows me by; and, thank goodness, it's getting to know me pretty well. You're down on your luck and don't want to tell me yours, I suppose. Very well; I'll find one for you. Let me see; you're dark. And I suppose your godfathers and godmothers called you Blanche or Lily; they always do, the idiots. But I should think Olive—yes, Olive would suit you very well. Olive—Olive—What goes with Olive? The sound of the name's the thing always. Olive Merton. How do you like that?"

"It will do very well; it is very pretty," said Nora. "But I will tell you my real name—"

"Better not, not till you know more about me. I can see you've got a 'history'—as they say in the novels and plays.

I mean you're not what you seem. You said you were Irish, and any one could tell that; but you're not like the usual Irish girl. I expect you're a lady; aren't you?" she added, with her bright eyes scanning Nora's face shrewdly.

"No," said Nora; "I am only a village girl."

"And talk like a lady, and wear your clothes like one. All right. I shan't contradict, and I'm not curious; not very, that is. And what did you come to London for?"

"To find work," said Nora. She answered frankly and freely. It was a relief to talk to some one, to tell some one of her hopes and fears. "There was nothing to do—no work to be got in Mari—where I lived, and I knew that if I got to London I should find plenty to do, and make some money."

"Oh, you did, did you?" commented Dora, laconically.

"Yes," said Nora. "And—and it was not only money I wanted; but—but—I don't know how to explain."

"I know," said Dora. "You wanted to better yourself."

Nora nodded.

"That was it," she said.

"To rise and be something better than a drudge in a sleepy village," continued Dora.

"Yes; I wanted to learn things, to see the world, to be something better—"

"Well, you've learned something already, I should say," remarked Dora.

Nora sighed.

"And what you've seen of the world hasn't turned your head with delight, I should imagine."

"No," said Nora, with another sigh. "But I have been unfortunate. I did not know any one, and I lost the address I told you of. But I shall find work, and—"

"Look here; who told you London was the place to come to? Who persuaded you?" broke in Dora.

"A gentleman—a gentleman from London."

"Oh!" said Dora, drily; and she eyed Nora keenly.

Nora met the gaze with her innocent eyes, though her colour rose; and Dora, after a long pause, tossed her head perplexedly and exclaimed:

"I can't make you out; but I've got a kind of feeling that you're square and straight, and so I'll tell you that your 'gentleman from London' must be either a fool or a villain."

Nora started and flushed.

"Why do you say that?" she asked, in a low voice.

"Because he lied when he said that London was the place

to find work in, especially for a woman—a girl from the country—who knows no one, nor anything to do.”

Nora looked troubled, and Dora softened her voice somewhat as she went on:

“My dear girl, London’s the worst place in the world to come to. It’s crammed to overflowing. There isn’t work enough for more than two-thirds of the people in it, and those, too, who’ve got a trade at their finger-ends. Why, there are thousands and thousands of girls and women starving, or next door to starving, on a few shillings a week—barely enough to pay rent and buy bread and tea, to say nothing of clothes.”

Nora grew pale and sighed.

“There never was such a bad time as this; but, there, it’s always bad enough in London. And what are you going to work at?”

Nora blushed. She was almost ashamed to say, now.

“I—I can do needlework,” she faltered.

Dora smiled bitterly.

“Oh, you can, can you? And you think you’ll make your fortune at that? Well, look here; look at the button-holes in my dress. Neat, aren’t they? Well, you can earn tenpence a day, working all your might and main, till your eyes ache, and your fingers are sore, and your head swims. And you can earn almost as much at dress and shirt-making—if you’re lucky. Oh, Lord! it makes me sick to hear you! Here!” She bounced up and took a cigarette-case from the mantelshelf. “You don’t mind tobacco? Will you have one?”

Nora stared and faltered out a “No,” and watched with amazement the girl light the cigarette.

Dora leant back and smoked herself into calmness.

“You look at me as if I were a monster at a penny show!” she said, with a laugh. “How green you are, to be sure! Half the women in London smoke. Why shouldn’t they? It’s soothing, and—and—oh, I can’t explain it. And why should the men have all the good things? We work as hard as they, and want ’em as badly. And where’s the harm?” she demanded, half defiantly.

“There is none—if you like it,” said Nora.

“Oh, I like it well enough, and so would you if you tried it. But better not. Somehow I can’t fancy you with a cigarette in your lips. It wouldn’t suit you. Not yet, anyhow. And now what do you think of London as a place to get work in?”



Nora sighed again; then she looked round the room unconsciously.

Dora understood the glance, and saw it linger for a second on a particularly gay dress which lay across a chair. It was of brilliant mauve, with silver spangles and deep lace on it. A pair of tights—though Nora did not know what they were—hung across it.

"You're wondering how I live, and what I find to do, if work's so scarce," she said, with a nod of the head.

Nora blushed.

"Yes, I am," she said. "Forgive me; I am so disappointed, so anxious—"

"There's nothing to forgive," said Dora, cheerfully; "and don't you be so meek and sensitive. You'll find it in your way here in London, whatever it was in Paddyland. Well, I'll tell you. I'm engaged at one of the theatres. I'm an actress. You're shocked, I suppose?" she added.

"Why should I be shocked?" said Nora, gently. "I scarcely know what it is you mean—do. I have read of theatres, and I was told there were many in London."

Dora stared at her with a puzzled smile.

"If I could only keep you as innocent as you are, I could make a fortune out of you by taking you round the country in a caravan as a natural curiosity," she said. "Well, I thought you'd be shocked, because most country people look upon a theatre as a sink of iniquity, and everybody that gets his living in it, especially women, as on the road to—you know where."

"Do they?" said Nora, ingenuously. "I didn't know it. Tell me what you do."

"I act and sing and dance. I'm a burlesque artist," said Dora. "I've got a part in the piece that's running at the Empress. It's only a small part. I'm not a star, you know."

"A star?" murmured the puzzled Nora.

Miss Moberley of the Empress groaned.

"A star, a principal actress, a swell," she explained. "But it's a good part, and I get a hand after my song and dance."

"A hand?" again murmured Nora, half ashamed of her ignorance.

"Applause," explained Dora. "And I think myself jolly lucky to get an engagement at the Empress at all. Some day—it's too late to-night—I'll tell you something of what I've gone through; how I've been chorus lady in starving touring companies, and, worse still, spent months upon

months hunting for even a small thing like that. I've played general utility for fifteen shillings a week at provincial theatres, sung in back slum music-halls, and"—she coloured and shut her lips tightly for a moment—"I've even sung in the streets."

To her surprise, Nora did not look shocked or very much distressed, but said, quietly:

"There was nothing wrong in that."

Dora's face softened.

"You said that very nicely," she said, in a low voice. "But you don't know, you don't understand, though I've never done anything to be ashamed of."

"I am sure of that," said Nora, with her frank, sympathetic eyes resting on the pretty, piquant face.

Dora jumped up, with the cigarette in one corner of her lips, and jerked up the gay dress.

"This is my costume. I brought it home from the theatre to get altered. I got permission. It was too tight, or something. Do you like it?"

Nora gazed at it with barely concealed amazement.

"It is very—very—"

Dora laughed.

"Wait, I'll put it on," she said.

She whisked behind Nora's chair, there was a rustle of silk, and in a moment or two she bounded before Nora's astonished eyes.

"Of course, you want to see it with the lime-light on it; and I want making-up," said Dora.

"You look beautiful!" said Nora, honestly.

Dora laughed.

"You've got a most fetching way with you, Miss Olive Merton," she said. "You shall see me before the footlights. I can get a pass for you some night. If you haven't been in a theatre before, you'll open your eyes, I expect."

Nora nodded, then she rose and passed her hands round the waist of the dress in the way women have.

"It's too tight here," she said.

"That's just it, that's the place," said Dora. "I couldn't make the idiot of a costume-woman at the Empress understand. I'll manage to alter it to-morrow."

"I will alter it—at least, I will try," said Nora. "I can work, and I made this dress. But perhaps you will think it badly made?" she added, humbly.

"It's stunning!" said Dora. "I noticed it when I saw you—directly I saw you. What are you looking for?" Nor

had begun to hunt amongst the things on the side table for a needle and cotton. "Do you think I'd let you do any work to-night? Is it likely? I'm not a savage. No, Miss Olive Merton, you'll go straight to bed. You won't mind sleeping with me, will you? My spare room"—she laughed—"is occupied."

Nora bent over the small figure—Dora was stooping to unlace her dancing-shoes—and kissed her.

The girl blushed with pleasure, and returned the kiss. "Yes; you have a way with you!" she said, with a laugh. "Now go to bed, and we'll talk over things to-morrow, while you're altering my dress, for I see you're dying to do it."

Nora looked at her through eyes dim with tears, but her heart was too full of gratitude for words. And, too, she felt that this strange little creature would rather not have them.

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## CHAPTER XIX.

WHEN Nora woke the next morning it was some minutes before she could realise where she was and how she came there. Then it all rushed back upon her, and she raised herself on her elbow and looked round. Dora was still asleep at her side, and Nora rose and dressed quietly, set the stove going and prepared the breakfast, and began to alter the dress.

She thought Dora would never wake, for Miss Moberley was a London girl, and an actress to boot, and the London girl—to say nothing of the actress—is not overfond of rising with the lark, especially when she goes to bed some hours later than that exemplary bird. But presently Dora stirred, threw her arms above her head, yawned, and then exclaimed:

"Gracious goodness! Are you up already? And got the breakfast! How mean of you! Why didn't you wake me? And what time is it?"

Nora consulted Dora's tiny watch on the mantelshelf.

"Half past nine. I did not like to wake you; you seemed to be enjoying yourself so much," she said, with a touch of Irish humour.

Dora sprang out of bed and began to dress.

"And you've got at that work already! Any one can see you are fresh from the country. The idea of working before breakfast! Put it down—put it down at once!" and with a laugh she snatched the dress away. "You'll soon spoil me, Miss Olive Merton, for I'm the laziest creature going."

Nora smiled and went and looked out of the window. Some neatly dressed and white-capped servants were shaking the mats and cleaning the steps in front of the houses; costermongers, with barrows of fruit and vegetables, were hawking their wares; an organ-grinder was already at work; blue-bloused butcher boys were driving ponies at a furious pace; a policeman sauntered along and exchanged a word or two with the road scrapers. A dull yellow haze hung over the scene. It was all so new and strange that Nora felt as if she had suddenly got into another world.

"Come and have your breakfast," Dora called to her, with a yawn. "How fresh and bright you look!" she added. "You've never much colour at the best of times, I should say; but you don't seem to want it; that's the advantage of that kind of complexion—old ivory they call it in London. You're exceedingly pretty, my dear, not to say beautiful. How you blush! Fancy blushing because a person—a girl, too—tells you you are good-looking. How I wish I could! Do you think you could teach me? Perhaps you'll teach me, at the same time, how to make tea; this is scrumptious. And how do you feel this morning?"

"Very well," said Nora; "but—but—"

"But a little strange," finished Dora for her. "That's only natural. Lor', if it had been me, I should have been in tears, and shouldn't have had the heart to get up. But we're different, my dear, very different. Not much idle tears about you, Miss Olive Merton. You see I haven't forgotten your name."

"It would be little use to cry," said Nora, in a low voice and with a faint smile. "But I am troubled and—and anxious."

"What about?" asked Dora. "How did you get this toast so nice and crisp? Have some."

"Well, I've no money, for one thing," said Nora; "and—and I do not know where to go or what to do."

"No money!" retorted Dora. "Well, you're saved the trouble of taking care of it. And as to going, why, you aren't going anywhere; you're going to stop here for the present. If you want anything to do, you can go on altering my dress."

"That will not take very long," Nora remarked.

"Oh, bother worrying," said Dora. "We'll go out for a walk after breakfast, and I'll show you a little bit of London, and we can talk matters over. Anyhow, you can stop here, if you care to—if you really like to, and can put up with me."

"I think I can put up with you," said Nora, with a flicker of a smile that was rather sad; "but I've no right to expect you to put up with me."

"Oh, I'll try," said Dora. "You goose! can't you see that I've taken to you? And no wonder! Why, you'd steal the heart from a cabbage, with that face and voice of yours, and that soft and grand little way you've got! Don't you trouble. Didn't I tell you last night I'd been down on my luck? And I tell you what, Miss Olive Merton, it's only those who have gone through the mill who can understand and sympathise with those who are still going through it. If I'd been a grand lady, or just a girl who had had all the fat through her life, I should have passed you last night, or called a policeman, and said: 'Take this poor girl to the work-house, my good man, and here's sixpence for you.' That's their form; they think sixpence will do everything, and that the work-house is the proper home of luxury for every poor person. Take this egg. There's some marmalade somewhere."

All the time this frivolous young person was rattling on she was noticing her guest's points—the beautiful oval face, with its ivory-like complexion, the deep, lustrous eyes, the delicate lips, the soft dark hair, and the shapely hands; and Miss Moberley wondered who and what this singularly lovely and remarkably quiet and well-bred girl could be. "Some swell or other—had a row with her friends, and cut and run," she concluded at last.

"And now we'll put on our things and go out," she said.

But Nora suggested she should wash up the breakfast things and put them away, and alter the dress first.

"Wash up? Never do, till I want the things for the next meal," said Dora.

But in her quiet way Nora insisted, and Miss Moberley assisted, smoking a cigarette the while. Then Nora got the dress, fitted it on, and patiently and carefully altered it.

Dora watched her at work, and was delighted with the result.

"It's first-rate!" she said. "And what stitches—fine as baby-clothes work! What a clever girl you are! My, what a treasure you'd be to some of the ladies at the Empress! They're always tearing their things—catch 'em against the wings or the properties, or in snatching 'em off. You should see a leading lady getting out of her costume while a gentleman is waiting to take her to a swell supper-party! They come off with a rush: so they get torn, and hence these tears. See the pun? Not bad, is it? They don't pun much, how

ever, in the new burlesques. But you don't know—never seen one, have you?"

"I have seen nothing," said Nora, overwhelmed by the ignorance which made half her companion said unintelligible.

"But you shall," said Dora. "Look here"—"Look here!" was a favourite expression of hers—"we've got a rehearsal on this morning—a rehearsal for an understudy—and I'll take you in. Of course, it's very different to what it is at night, with the house full and all the lights on; but it will give you an idea—break the ice, so to speak. Now, put on that nice little hat and jacket of yours, and let's go out. I know you must be pining for the air; you country people always are. You wouldn't be, if you had to stand on a draughty stage every night—too much air there."

They went out, and Dora conducted her newly found friend to the west end of the Great City. That is to say, to the region of parks and stately streets, with great houses and brilliant shops; and the magnificence she saw filled Nora's soul with wonder and not a little awe.

Dora was delighted with her companion's amazement and appreciation, and really played the part of cicerone very well.

"Lor', I never saw London in this light before!" she remarked. "I'm so used to it, that it seems nothing to me; but I daresay it is wonderful to a stranger, and a girl from the country. Don't you rush over the road in that way, my child. Nobody's going to run over you, not even the hansom cabs; they know better, for all their 'side.' Just walk across slowly as if you were half asleep, and they'll pull up fast enough. It's rather fun making them pull up, isn't it?" And you can pretend not to hear their language. Do they use swear words in your part of the country? Look, that's the Duke of Westminster, and that's Mr. Gladstone sitting beside him. Ever heard of them? And that's the Duchess of Montrose in that victoria."

"You seem to know every one," said Nora.

"Oh, they're well known. You'll be able to pick out the great people right enough presently. Let's turn into the park."

Perhaps the park, with its double row of riders, its long line of carriages and the strollers on the footpaths, most amazed and delighted Nora. The season was nearly over, but town was still rather full, for the House had not yet risen for the recess. And as Nora gazed at the handsome carriages and the beautifully-tailored horse riders, it flashed across her mind that it was amongst these that she should see Denis, if

ever she saw him. She little guessed that Denis was on his way to Australia.

"And now I think we'll have lunch," said Dora. "We'll take a 'bus to the Strand and go to the Garden; you'd like that, I fancy."

"Yes; I should like a garden," said Nora; "but—but—I've no—you will not forget that I have no money, please."

"You take precious good care I sha'n't forget it," said Dora. "Don't you worry. I pay this time. When you are flush you shall pay for me, I promise you. And as for a garden—oh, Lor', fancy a garden in the Strand! It's only a name for it, you silly!"

They went to the famous restaurant, where, it appeared, Dora was well known, and received a respectfully warm welcome. A nice little lunch was placed before them, and Nora, who was as hungry as every healthy young woman should be at that time of day, ate and enjoyed, and gazed and marvelled. If she had been an ordinary peasant girl, her eyes would have become as saucers by this time, so much had she seen to startle and astound her.

Now and again Dora nodded and smiled to some of the persons in the restaurant, and whispered their names to Nora. They were the names of well-known actors and actresses, journalists, playwrights; but, of course, Nora did not recognise them.

"You'll know them all pretty soon," said Dora, as she sipped the liqueur which wound up the lunch, and which Nora had declined. "They're all in the shop windows—their photos, I mean; and you see paragraphs about them in the papers every day."

"All the famous people seem to be here—in this place," said Nora, in her innocence.

"Right you are," asserted Dora. "You are in the thick of 'em here. The Strand's the place for genius and talent. More clever people pass over its pavement in an hour than in any other street in a year. Now, I've got to go to rehearsal. The Empress is quite close, and we can walk."

"Sha'n't I be—intruding?" asked Nora.

The mere idea of a theatre filled her with awe. She was as innocent as that, you see.

Dora laughed.

"Don't you be afraid!" she said. "I'll see you through. And, look here, though I've only a small part in 'Cupid Caught'—that's the name of the burlesque—I'm thought something of, and anybody I introduce—see?"

She paid the modest bill, and they walked to the Empress. The exterior of that palatial temple of the drama awed Nora, and she looked at it with awe and wonder.

"This way," said Dora. "Morning, Hawkins."

This was to the stage-doorkeeper, who nodded to her with a mixture of respect and familiarity.

Nora followed her friend and protector down a narrow, whitewashed passage and through a swing door on to the stage, and saw—what few persons see—a theatre by daylight and in *deshabille*.

The Empress is one of the finest theatres in London, and at night, when it is lit by its thousand and one electric lamps, is magnificent—as Nora realised afterwards—but by day, with its gilding dimmed, its velvet seats swathed in calico coverings, its lamps out, it is a very different place. The only light came from a huge T-square gas arrangement where the footlights blazed at night. Two or three persons were seated in the stalls; the orchestra was there, but half hidden in the gloom; the scenery, which roused the enthusiasm of the audience each night, looked like a hideous daub of yellows and greens.

An old woman, in a kind of bathing-cap, was sweeping out the stalls, a carpenter was mending a scene with a noisy hammer, and the actors and actresses, in the unattractive dress of every-day life, were lounging about the stage, talking, yawning, laughing in a weary, perfunctory way.

There was a piano in the corner of the stage, with the orchestra, and a middle-aged lady was seated there, looking bored to death, and yet alert and watchful. Beside her was the stage-manager, a thin, anxious-looking man, in a grey suit and bowler hat, which he wore so far on the back of his head as to cause a feeling of wonder that it did not fall off.

There was the usual huge chorus, chaffing and playing together, and the chief stage-carpenter, with his mouth full of nails and a hammer in his hand. Dora threaded her way through this varied mob, and Nora followed close at her heels, her heart beating with the shyness caused by the novelty of the scene.

"Now, you go down and sit in the stalls," said Dora. "Step down there by that man with the big drum; and sit there till I come to you. You are going to see a rehearsal, my dear."

Nora stepped down and hid herself in a stall near the stage-box, and looked round her in a kind of dream. Why, it was only a few days ago—how many, how few!—she had stood



beside Marishannon Lake, and here she was inside a theatre! Was she asleep and dreaming?

Presently the band tuned up, the stage-manager came to the front of the stage, and knocked upon it with his stick.

"Are we ready?" he demanded. "We're late, awfully late!"

"We're waiting for Miss Temple," said a voice.

The stage-manager swore. The band played part of the overture, the company—that is, the actors—got into groups and talked.

Presently a young lady in a beautiful walking-dress, with a gold-tipped cane in her hand, sauntered on, with two gentlemen in attendance. She looked perfectly unconcerned and free from care—to put it mildly.

"We're waiting for you, Miss Temple," remarked the stage-manager, more in sorrow than in anger. "You're late."

"Oh, am I? Sorry. Well, why don't you begin? Here I am. Where is my confounded fag?" A modest-looking girl—the great lady's understudy—stepped forward. "Oh, here you are. Well, you know the business, don't you? All right, go ahead; I can't stay here all day, don't you know!"

They went ahead as if they had not been waiting the best part of an hour; and Nora, from her dark corner, had the inestimable privilege of witnessing "a rehearsal for the understudy." All the actors and smaller fry were in ordinary dress; they "walked" through their parts, sang their songs, did their dances, in a perfunctory and heartless way, and sometimes so wrongly that the stage-manager was roused to fury or cast into the depths of despair. He grew hot and perspiry, his language—sometimes audible, at others, when it was at its worst, inaudible—became quite unfit for publication. He stamped his foot, tore his hair, and waved his podgy hands furiously.

"Is that the way to come on?" he would demand. "You are a gay and giddy band of peasants. By Heaven!—and the other place—you look like a gang of convicts! Come on to the stage as if you liked it, not as if you were doing it against your will. This is the way." He rushed to the wing and danced on, looking so ridiculous in his modern attire of regulation trousers and cutaway coat that everybody laughed; but they caught the idea and followed his instructions.

The leading lady, Miss Temple, leant against the wing, and talked with her two gentlemen friends, and evidently regarded the whole business as a nuisance. She moved and

spoke her words and sang her songs, when she was asked to do so, in an indolent, reluctant fashion, and more than once roused the stage-manager to fury.

## CHAPTER XX.

NORA, looking on from her dim and dirty corner, was amazed at the lack of interest displayed by every one concerned. Even Dora, who was quick and sharp enough at home, seemed to take the whole thing as a mechanical performance, and sang her songs and danced her dance in a nerveless, lymphatic fashion. The understudy was the only person who seemed to take any interest in the business. She went through her, or, rather, Miss Temple's part, carefully, and received all the hints and corrections of the stage-manager patiently. Nora admired and pitied her, and her heart beat with sympathy for her, for Nora understood that unless Miss Temple should fall ill, or for some other reason be unable to play, this young girl would not have a chance of playing before the public the part she was learning so patiently and conscientiously.

Just before the rehearsal finished, a stout gentleman with a pale face and bulbous eyes came into the theatre and stood for a moment at a corner of the stage. At his appearance every body smartened up and stood at attention, so to speak. For this was the great Mr. Flexton, the manager, not only of the Empress, but of half a dozen other theatres. He too looked weary and overworked—as well he might!—and after a glance round, and a nod to one and another, he stepped into the orchestra to speak to the conductor. As he did so, his dull eyes—sharp to observe for all their dulness—caught sight of Nora. He looked at her attentively, and as Nora flushed slightly under his keen regard, he said:

"Were you waiting to see me?"

"No," said Nora; and she explained that she had accompanied Miss Moberley. He glanced at the stage, at the trim little figure, at that moment practising a dance by the wings, and then looked at Nora.

"Are you in the profession?" asked Mr. Flexton.

"The profession?" faltered Nora, innocently.

The great man smiled as if she had answered him—and, indeed, she had—raised his hat with a weary little gesture, and, followed by his secretary, disappeared in the gloom behind her.

Soon after, the rehearsal came to a close, and Dora beck-

oned to Nora to ascend to the stage. As the girls passed through the crowd, several of the actors turned to look at Nora, and Miss Temple was heard asking who she was.

"Well, what do you think of it?" said Dora. "Rum, isn't it? Not quite your idea of an abode of bliss? I expect we looked a dowdy crew of weary idiots. Saunders—that's the stage-manager—loses his hair pretty quick, doesn't he?"

"Loses his hair? I didn't see that he was bald."

"Oh, his temper, I mean," laughed Dora; "but they all do that. A stage-manager's no use unless he flies around. It's the only way of getting some people to move themselves."

"It all seemed very, very dull," said Nora, for want of a better word.

Dora smiled shrewdly.

"You wait until to-night," she said. "I've got a pass for the back of the dress-circle for you, and—oh, well, you'll see. To tell you the truth, I wanted you to see the seamy side first. I don't want you to be stage-struck."

"Why not?" said Nora, innocently.

"Because—well, I don't think it would suit you, Miss Olive Merton, that's why. Now, I've got to work this afternoon; some new lines in my part, and an extra dance. We'll have some tea first."

They went home and got their tea, and Dora set to work learning her extra lines, cleared half the room by pushing all the furniture into the other half, and gravely practised her dance. Nora begged for something to do, obtained some clothes to mend, and glanced up now and again with wonder and curiosity at the serious little countenance of the dancer.

Presently Dora flung herself, breathless, on the bed and took a rest for an hour. There was some coffee—with a cigarette for Dora—and then they dressed and went to the theatre.

Nora, as they entered and an attendant led her to her seat in the corner of the dress-circle, could scarcely realise that the place was the same. The great auditorium, with gold and crimson glittering and glowing in the electric light, the brilliant audience passing into its seats, the proscenium of white and gold framing the great plush curtains, all took her breath away; and when the orchestra played and the curtain rose on the first scene—a masterpiece of the scene-painter's art—with its gaily and exquisitely-dressed crowd of villagers; when they struck up the opening chorus and began to dance, Nora leant back pale and open-eyed. Then on came Miss Temple, no longer limp and careless, but vivacious and smiling, the love-

liest of creatures, in the palest of blue silk, with muslin and lace foaming round her shapely feet, and diamonds glittering on her bosom, on her arms, on her hands, and in her hair.

Nora could scarcely believe her eyes, and she wondered how the vast audience could sit apparently unmoved by the marvellous scene, the exquisite dresses, the entralling music. It was fairy-land to her, and yet all real. When the low comedy merchant said anything funny, a smile lit up her face; when Miss Temple and the tenor sang their famous moonlight duet, her eyes filled with tears and she held her breath; but when Dora—her friend and protector—bounded and sang her song and danced—was that the same dancer which Nora had watched in the bedroom?—Nora's heart thrilled with admiration and delight. She forgot the people round her, and did not see the smile with which now and again they regarded her evident enthusiasm and greenness. The glamour—the first glamour—of the theatre was upon her, enveloping her.

After all, she thought with a long sigh, Spencer Foyle had not exaggerated. London was a great, a wonderful, a marvellous place!

She sat perfectly still, scarcely taking her eyes from the stage, even during the *entr'actes*, so lost was she to her surroundings and everything but the play, that she started violently when some one touched her on the shoulder. It was the attendant who had shown her to her seat, and he bent down and whispered:

"Miss Moberley says, will you please come with me, miss?"

Nora rose at once, but glanced at the stage wistfully. She did not like to miss a moment of it.

The man led her along some winding passages, unlocked a door, and she suddenly found herself on the stage, behind the wings, and in the midst of a group of villagers. Their gay dresses, the paint and powder on their faces, and their subdued laughter startled and almost frightened her.

"This way, miss," said the man; and he led the way round the back of the stage, and, stopping at a door, knocked.

"Is that you, Olive? Come in," said Dora's voice.

The door was opened, and Nora entered no less a place than Miss Temple's dressing-room. It was beautifully furnished, and was littered with costumes, dress-boxes and wigs, and articles of make-up. On a couch sat Miss Temple herself in all her glory; a lovely object—but with tears of vexation in her eyes and an angry frown on her fair face. Dora knelt beside her with a portion of Miss Temple's skirt in her hand.

"Oh, here you are! This is my friend, Miss Merton, Miss Temple. Olive, dear, Miss Temple has had an accident—"

"It's that beastly stairs!" broke in the leading lady. "If something isn't done, I shall throw up my engagement. I never come down them without catching my dress. It's shameful, abominable—"

She threatened to burst into tears, and Dora hastened to out in:

"Could you mend it, do you think, Olive? I mean now, at once? Miss Temple's dresser is away—ill, and there's no one else capable."

Nora knelt and examined the damage. There was an ugly rent in the delicate overskirt of lace—real lace, be in noted.

"A pin won't do," said Miss Temple, "if you're going to suggest that. I've got to dance, and I don't want to risk coming a cropper. No, thank you. And I can't dance in anything but this, and I won't go on at all—"

"What's the matter?" demanded a voice at the door.

"Anything wrong?"

"Look!" exclaimed Miss Temple, in tragic tones, pointing to her dress, as if Mr. Saunders himself had done the injury of *malice prepense*. "I can't go on; I declare I won't! You'd better say I'm ill—dead—what you like. It's those stairs! I've spoken about them before."

"I'll have 'em pulled down," said the stage-manager, blandly. "I'll have the whole place pulled down and rebuilt, of course; but I can't do it to-night—at least, I'm afraid not."

"That's right, laugh, jeer, be brutal!" exclaimed Miss Temple, with the air of a martyr; and she mopped her eyes carefully—you have to do it carefully when they are surrounded by grease-paint and powder.

"Can you mend it?" asked Saunders of Nora.

Nora inclined her head.

"I think so," she said, in a low voice.

"Mend it? Of course she can't. It isn't possible in the time. Oh, I shan't go on! I've made up my mind!" exclaimed Miss Temple, throwing herself back.

But Nora had seized needle and cotton from Dora's hand, and had set to work. In a few minutes the rent was no longer visible, and she looked up.

"It will not break out," she said. "It is all right—that is, for to-night."

Miss Temple took up the skirt and examined it, and her

face grew less tragic, and even bright, as she glanced at the fine stitches.

"So it is!" she exclaimed, just like a child whose favourite toy has been mended. "How good of you! And how clever! That wretched woman of mine would have bungled it into a regular bunch. Yes, I'm ready," she broke off, as the call-boy hammered at the door and shouted for her. "Wait here till I come off again," and she hurried away.

"I'm on in this scene, too," said Dora, hastily. "Wait for me here. You're a clever dear!" and she managed to give Nora a kiss as she dashed past her.

Nora sat down on one of the gilt chairs and waited. She could hear the music of the band and the songs; presently there was a sort of stillness, and then a roar of applause. Miss Temple had got through her dance with her usual effect, and the audience was in its nightly rapture.

She came back presently, flushed with triumph, and flung herself on the couch.

"It didn't come undone at all," she said. "It was awfully good of you! I think your friend is awfully clever, Miss Moberley; and I'm ever so much obliged to you, Miss—Miss—"

"Merton—Olive Merton," said Dora.

"Yes; I can't thank you enough. I wonder whether you'd mind accepting a little token—souvenir—what do you call it? It really was so kind!"

She took a ring from the littered dressing-table and held it out to Nora. It was a costly ring—a present, of course—and Miss Temple, who, when she was pleased, could be generosity itself, smiled pleasantly up at Nora, and was rather taken aback—for gifts are common and frequent enough in the theatre—when Nora shrank back and blushed.

"Oh, but you must! Why not?" demanded the leading lady, with wide-open eyes.

"I—I have done so little; it was nothing," said Nora, shyly, and yet not awkwardly. "And it was only roughly done, too," she added. "If you will let me take it home, I will mend it properly—or try to."

"If you're too proud to take my trumpery ring," said Miss Temple, "I'm too proud to let you mend my dress; thank you all the same."

Dora threw herself into the breach. "Miss Merton's quite right," she said. "That ring isn't trumpery; it's worth ever so much; too much to give for so small a job."

"What have *you* got to do with it?" demanded the spoiled young lady.

"Miss Merton's my friend—my cousin," responded Dora. "It's—it's no use getting angry. If she says she won't take it, she won't. Look at her!" And she laughed.

Miss Temple looked at Nora, pale and self-possessed, and about as movable as a stone statue, and laughed too.

"She is a funny girl," she said, with amused wonder.

"Yes; isn't she?" assented Dora, as if they were talking of some one absent. "But you give her the dress, Miss Temple, and if you think it's well done, why, you can pay her what you think it's worth."

Nora was about to refuse any kind of payment, but suddenly remembered her absolute pennilessness, and, flushing, held her peace.

"Very well, then," assented Miss Temple.

As she spoke, a knock came to the door, and a voice said:

"How long shall you be, do you think? An hour, a week, or a month? I'm not at all impatient, but the supper was ordered for half past eleven, and I thought I'd mention that cold *entrées* are slightly indigestible."

Miss Temple laughed.

"Oh, I shan't be long. Just you wait and see. Give him a cigarette as you go out, Miss Moberley, will you?" She tossed Dora a silver case.

The two girls went out, and found a gentleman lounging near the door.

Dora offered him the cigarette-case—of course he had heard Miss Temple's injunction—and he took it, thanked her, and raised his hat. As he did so, he glanced at Nora, and a faint momentary look of surprise came into his eyes.

As they passed out, Dora said:

"Did you see that gentleman? That's Mr. Talbot Sedley, of the *Penny Cornet*. He's the author of the next play we're going to do, I think; at least, I'm pretty sure. Miss Temple's going to a supper-party to-night." She sighed. "It's well to be her! What a temper she's got! But her heart's all right; and when she's pleased, she'll give you anything, everything. Have you any idea of what that young lady earns?"

Nora shook her head. How should she have? Dora mentioned a sum which, for obvious reasons, may not be disclosed; and it was so large that Nora did not appreciate it. She had never heard of such an amount of money before.

"I'm glad you didn't take her ring, because now—well, I've got a little idea. You go down with that dress mended

—as you only can do it, dear—and I shouldn't be surprised if she offers you regular work."

Nora flushed, and her breath came quickly. Regular work meant regular wages; money to enable her to live without charity, to send help to her mother! Why, Fortune, which had frowned upon her so sternly, was beginning to smile!

"Do you think so?" she gasped.

Dora nodded.

"I'm sure of it. But mind, I don't know whether you'd like it; her temper—well, you've seen what it is. And it's hard enough for us to bear who are used to it, but you, you are strange to this kind of life, and—somehow different to the rest of us. If you like to wait and look out for something else—"

"Oh, no, no!" said Nora, quickly, gratefully. "Besides, if—if it were ever so unpleasant and disagreeable—and it is not—beggars can't be choosers, you know."

"You aren't a beggar!" exclaimed Dora, rather angrily. "But I don't think it's a bad opening," she added.

She proved a true prophet. The next evening Nora took the dress down to the theatre and was shown at once into Miss Temple's room.

"Oh, here you are!" she said, looking over her shoulder, with her powder-puff poised. "And you've brought the skirt? Let me look at it! Yes, it's beautifully done, beautifully! And now—where's my purse?"

She snatched up a dainty affair inlaid with tortoise-shell, and took out a sovereign.

"That is too much," began Nora. Down went the purse, and down also went Miss Temple's foot.

"Oh, you're too trying for anything! Here!" She tossed the purse to Nora. "Perhaps you'll take what you think right. Perhaps *that* will satisfy you. But mind, if you take less than half a sovereign, I'll never speak to you again."

Nora took out the coin mentioned, and laid the purse on the table.

"Thank you," she said, in her quiet, self-possessed way.

"And thank *you*," said Miss Temple, who had just read a good "notice," and was in a charming temper. "And now I wonder whether you'd undertake all my mending and altering? Of course you can't be my dresser—you don't understand it, do you?"

Nora shook her head.

"But the other—the work, I will do, if you think I can," she said.



"I'm sure," said Miss Temple; "and as to the price— Oh, there's my call! Right! Look here, Miss Merton, I'll arrange with your friend, Miss Moberley. You and I would only get to squabbling over the business, I know; for though you are very nice and very clever, you really are most aggravating— Coming!" and away she went, leaving a fine dust of powder and an odour of violets in her track.

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"What, Nora Neil gone? What the devil do you mean?" exclaimed Lord Larry.

It was Donovan who had brought the news; Donovan, pale and haggard, and with a haunted and anxious look in his eyes.

"She's gone, my lord," said the poor fellow, almost sullenly. "She was away all day yesterday, but Mrs. Neil thought no harm. Nora's been away before, by token. But a letther's come this mornin'—a letther from Cork—sayin' that Nora's gone—gone clane away from us!"

Lord Larry motioned to a footman to give him his hat.

"I'll go down and see Mrs. Neil," he said; "and you, Donovan, keep your own counsel. Don't go blathering about the place like a ewe that's lost its lamb."

"Sure, an' that's just what I am!" said poor Donovan, slinking off with bent head.

"I'll go with you," said Spencer Foyle. "There must be some mistake, I should think. The girl—I have only seen her casually, it's true—didn't strike me as likely to do this. Why should she?"

"The Lord knows!" said the Earl, looking rather uneasy.

"It's a strange girl, and— Confound it!"

They found Mrs. Neil with the letter still in her hand. She was not crying, and there was more of fear than sorrow in her face.

"Is this true, Mrs. Neil?" asked the Earl.

She rose and handed him the letter, gripping her chair hard. He read it with a grave face.

"She's gone, right enough," he said to Foyle, who stood in the background. "She must be found and brought back at once! I can't have any of my people going to ruin—" He tried to catch the word back, and bit his lip. "She must be found."

"Yes—yes!" said Mrs. Neil, hoarsely. "Find her—find her! Bring her back. You don't know— Oh, bring her back!"

"Don't be alarmed, Mrs. Neil," said Foyle, in quite a kind and gentle voice. "Perhaps I can help you. I have received

a letter this morning which will take me to London—I was going to tell you,” he added to the Earl—“and I’ll find her for you.”

Mrs. Neil looked at him with dumb gratitude. Foyle glanced at his watch.

“You can have me driven—?”

“Yes—yes!” said the Earl, quickly. “It’s very good of you, Foyle, to take this trouble,” he said as they went back to the Hall.

“Not at all,” said Foyle. “I shall find her easily enough, I daresay, and I hope that fellow will hold his tongue, as you told him. She’ll be back before she’s missed, I’ve no doubt.”

He reached London, and took a cab to the boarding-house to which he had directed Nora. There was a faint smile on his lips as he stood at the door; the smile with which the fowler delicately and daintily takes the rare bird from the net.

The door was opened, and Foyle taken to the landlady.

“I wrote telling you to expect a young lady, the daughter of an old friend, who is going to take lessons in London—” he began, and the landlady, with a nod, broke in:

“Oh, yes; I got the letter, and had a room ready; but the young lady has not arrived.”

“Not arrived!” said Foyle, with no sign of discomfiture.

“Ah, yes; I see! She ought to have been here last night, but I expect she has gone to pay a visit to some friends, and they have kept her. Retain the room, please. What beautiful weather, is it not? By the way, when she arrives, will you say that I have a message from her mother? Good-day.”

He took his departure with his best bow and a pleasant smile; but the smile disappeared as he went down the steps, and he uttered an oath under his breath.

The girl had escaped him!

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## CHAPTER XXI.

Now, one evening—as Nora was stitching some lace on one of Miss Temple’s dresses, and Spencer Foyle was smoking a cigarette in a certain fast club and wondering what had become of her—a wagon drove slowly along the rough, natural road of an Australian ravine.

Mr. Culmer was driving the stout pair of horses, and another pair—for riding—trotted at the side. On one of these was seated Denis.

Mr. Culmer was smoking his old black pipe calmly and re-

flectively, but Denis was looking round him with intense interest and subdued excitement. For they were passing through such magnificent scenery that any attempt to describe it would not only bore the reader, but end in utter failure.

And they were nearing their mysterious destination, which accounts for Denis's excitement.

They had been a long while making the journey; for one reason, because Culmer had insisted upon showing Denis some of the sights by the way; and for others, because the wagon and horses and other things had to be purchased, and a round-about way, possessing a road, chosen. And Mr. Culmer seemed in no hurry, and to be suspicious of being followed.

It had not been an unpleasant journey by any means, and Mr. Culmer had proved an agreeable companion. Denis had "taken to" the man at the offset, and Culmer had more than returned the liking.

There had been no trouble on the score of Mr. Culmer's "weakness;" for when it had threatened to display itself, Denis had sat upon it at once and promptly.

It was at Melbourne that Culmer had seemed inclined to go upon the rampage; but at the first sign Denis was, as Culmer afterwards put it admiringly, "on the spot." He had simply locked the door, and remarked that he and Culmer were going to spend a quiet evening at home.

Culmer had had a glass or two, and wanted more badly, and he looked as if he were going to cut up rough.

"Oh, I ain't going out, ain't I?" he said, sarcastically; "and who's going to stop me, Mr. Denis?"

"I am," said Denis, firmly but pleasantly.

"Oh! and may I make so bold as to ask how?" demanded Culmer, with a frown.

"Well, I don't know till I begin," said Denis, smilingly.

"But I shall begin by knocking you down."

"You couldn't!" said Culmer, shortly. "I should smash you if we came to blows, Mr. Denis."

Denis eyed him over still smilingly.

"You're heavier than I am, and well set up, and tougher, I daresay; but then I can box a bit—I used to take a turn at the German Gym, you know—and I'm quick on my pins. Look here, let us have a friendly set-to. If you down me, why—you can go on the spree for as long as you like; but if I win, then—we'll have a game of draughts."

Culmer laughed shortly. Draughts, compared with a jolly good rampage in Melbourne, sounded rather tame.

He took off his coat and turned up his sleeves, and Denis

did likewise. Then the two men faced each other; Denis smiling, Culmer looking grim and ugly.

I will not describe the fight. Suffice it, that Culmer fought wildly and heavily, so that if one of his left-handers had "got in," Denis would have been shot through the wooden partition, and would have owned himself beaten, packed up his trunk, and gone back to England.

But Culmer's blows did not get in. Denis was like a piece of quicksilver, and danced round his foe, keeping clear of the sledge-hammer blows, while planting a judicious tap when he could. Culmer tried to rush it, lost his head and his wind, and suddenly Denis shot out his strong, lithe arm, and down went Mr. Culmer with the sound of a falling ox.

He lay there gasping, with his eyes shut; and Denis, panting a little, went up and helped him up.

"How's that, umpire?" he asked, pleasantly.

Culmer looked round vacantly for a moment, then shook himself like a Newfoundland dog fresh from the water, and—held out his hand. He was a good-hearted fellow.

"I'm downed," he said. "You were right, Mr. Denis. If ever I show nasty again, just repeat the dose, will you?"

"I will," said Denis, cheerfully and firmly. "And now we'll have some tea and spend a nice, quiet evening."

From that moment the respect that Culmer had always entertained for his young companion was accompanied by a warm regard, which showed itself in many little ways.

Once Denis got a chill and threatened fever, and the rough man sat beside him and nursed him with the patience and the tenderness of a woman. Denis was ill for a week, and often during that time he opened his eyes in the still watches of the night to see the gnarled, weather-beaten face beside him, and the heavily-browed eyes bent on him with a look in them which, if Denis had been only just a little weaker, would have brought the tears to his eyes.

Directly Denis was up and about again, they completed their preparations and started for their long journey across the wilds. It was a hard as well as a long journey, and Culmer, in an unostentatious way, insisted upon taking most of the rough. Denis had the spare blanket, the snuggest corner of the wagon, the tit-bit of the meals. He remonstrated, of course, but Culmer was stubborn.

"You're younger than I am, and ain't used to roughing it," he said. "I'm a stronger man than you are—though I can't handle my fists quite as well, Mr. Denis."

Culmer was no great talker. He would listen with obvious

pleasure to Denis all day, but he said little himself, and of his past history nothing; and as they neared their destination, his taciturnity increased. It was as if he were absorbed in the object of their enterprise, and brooding over it. But, all the same, while he smoked his short black pipe, he kept his eyes and ears open, and sights and sounds which escaped Denis were not allowed to pass unnoticed by the old backwoodsman.

On this evening he had sat and drove and smoked for quite an hour without a word; but every now and then he would look up and nod in response to Denis's exclamations of wonder and admiration.

"I never imagined anything like it!" Denis would remark, gazing round with kindling eyes. "It's—it's fairy-land! It's Ireland, and England, and Wales crammed into one and multiplied by a hundred."

They were winding along the ravine, with mountains rising on either side of them, and clothed with gigantic trees. The valley was carpeted with emerald and bossed with flowers.

A mighty river tore over the rocks in silver and foam, or glided over patches of smooth bed; the water was so clear in these places that the sand gleamed through it like gold, and every rock and stone were visible.

All along the road Denis had shot to his heart's content, but here he could not bring himself to outrage the exquisite silence that brooded over the magnificent scene by the sharp barking of his Winchester.

"It's just enough to live in such a place. The air's like champagne. I want to shout and sing!"

"Better not," said Culmer, gazing round him, and flicking a fly off the near horse's ear. "Wait till we get snug at home, and are sure there are no neighbours; then you can sing and shout as hard as you like."

"Are we near?" asked Denis for the twentieth time that day.

Culmer nodded, and glanced at the sun.

"Be there before set," he said, laconically.

The sun sank slowly, and presently Culmer turned the horses off the road, or level, and began to ascend the hill. He had to use the whip, for the horses were tired; and Denis, glancing up at the huge mountain, wondered whether Culmer hoped to make the full ascent; but after about a mile, Culmer turned and began to descend again. They passed through a strip of forest, making their way with difficulty, and suddenly came into an open space.

Culmer pointed with his whip.

"We're there," he said; and there was a touch of colour in his face.

As for Denis, his heart beat furiously, and he gazed eagerly before him.

The open space they had reached was not large in extent, and was rough and rocky. There were huge boulders—they made Denis think, with a sudden pang, of the beach by Mari-shannon Lake—cropping out of the sparse grass. The triangular piece of ground was surrounded by trees, which gave it the look of a place set apart and reserved by nature for some purpose. There was no sign of life, no bird nor animal, and an air of mystery hung—or seemed to Denis, in the feverish state of his imagination, to hang—about it.

"Here at last!" he said, in a kind of whisper; and he looked about his feet as if he expected to see the wonderful opals glittering on the surface of the ground.

Culmer smiled, and eyed him curiously.

"Yes; don't look very promising, eh?" he said.

Denis's glance went toward the wagon, where the spades and picks lay, and Culmer understood. But he shook his head.

"Not to-night, lad," he said, gravely. "We'll outspan and rest. We want it."

They took out the horses and watered them—a rill which ran down the mountain skirted the opening—and after the animals had enjoyed a roll, tethered them amongst the thick rich grass. Then Culmer got out the cooking apparatus, made a fire, and gravely—and as slowly as ever—began to cook the supper. Denis helped, but all the time he was looking about him with suppressed eagerness and excitement. Culmer glanced at him now and again, and presently laid his horny hand on Denis's arm.

"Sit down and eat your grub, Mr. Denis," he said. "I know how you feel, but—well, they won't run away before the morning. They're there fast enough, waitin' for the pick and the shovel. Eat and rest."

Denis sank down on the boulder, and the meal commenced. There was bread—which Culmer had made the day before—tinned mutton, and tea.

Tea is the great comforter, sustainer, stimulant, and sedative in Australia. Leave the squatter his tea, and some flour for a damper, and he complaineth not.

There were several lead-lined boxes in the wagon.

Culmer ate slowly and in silence, his eyes fixed on the plate or cup. When they had finished, he mechanically set about "clearing up"—as if they were at a picnic up the river,

Denis thought—and then he lit his pipe, and, rising, motioned Denis to follow him. He led him up the hill and through a belt of trees, and then pointed down to the valley beneath.

"This is our watch-tower and look-out," he said, in a lower voice. "There is the road we came along. No one can reach this place by any other, and no one can get here without our having plenty of notice. We could see 'em coming for miles."

Denis nodded.

"Is that important?" he asked.

"Rather!" replied Culmer, grimly.

"How far does your land—the piece you retained—extend?" asked Denis.

Culmer pointed with his pipe-stem.

"As far as those trees on the rise to the left, half-way down the road in front of us, about a quarter of a mile behind, and just here at the end."

Denis was surprised.

"It is large. I thought, from your description, that it was much smaller."

"It's small for Australia," explained Culmer. "Many of us held miles upon miles. It would take some time to ride round some men's land."

"And where are the men to whom you sold the remainder of the property?" asked Denis.

Culmer shook his head.

"Don't know. I didn't see sight of 'em as we came along, and I kept a good look-out. But, like enough, they'll come up presently with sheep."

"And they'll find us?" said Denis.

"Well, they may and they mayn't. You see, the best pasturage is down in the valley, and they'll keep there, naturally. Very likely they'll only send one man, as outrunner, and he may not spot us. He wouldn't have any reason for climbing up here."

"He would see the smoke of our fire," said Denis.

"Yes, he might; but if he came up, we should see him coming, and be prepared for him. He mustn't find out our little lay, Mr. Denis. This yere is my plan: We'll cut down some trees a little way from *the* ground, and set up a camp there; and if a visitor comes, I shall pitch him a yarn about you being a young gentleman of fortune as I've brought out with me just for the change and the sport; and I could wink and let them think I was going to sell you the land at a good price."

"I see," said Denis, with a smile. "And these precautions and subterfuges are necessary, I suppose?"

"What do *you* think?" asked Mr. Culmer, significantly. "There's a fortune—two—there, lying under them there rocks—a better fortune than you could get out of many a gold mine. And did you ever see a gold-diggin', Mr. Denis?"

Denis shook his head.

"Well, I have. Gold's got a kind of bewitchment about it. It turns men—some of 'em, most of 'em—into devils. A man will sell his own life, his own soul, for it; and he'll kill another man for the sake of a few ounces. You carry your life in your hands where there's gold about. And it's worse with gems. They're more fascinatin' still; they're smaller and more—more portable, and they're prettier, and take the eye."

Denis nodded.

"If," continued Culmer, "this place was known, why, in twenty-four hours it would be crowded, like a bush is crowded wi' a swarm o' bees, and the game would be up."

"But," said Denis, with natural surprise, "this is your property, your own land, Culmer."

"Yours and mine, Mr. Denis," corrected Culmer. "That's right enough; but they wouldn't care for that. You saw some o' the roughs and toughs down in the cities there?" He jerked his pipe downward. "Well, there are plenty o' that kind mooching around the bush. Old station-hands that have had the sack; chaps that have had to cut and run from the old country; regular bad 'uns as stick at nothing. If some o' them spotted this place our lives wouldn't be worth much. I told you there was risk to be run, Mr. Denis."

"That's all right," said Denis, cheerfully.

Culmer nodded approvingly.

"That's the way to take it, sir," he said, quietly. "We've got a kind o' property that's bewitchin' and kind o' maddenin'. Why, *you* were all agog to get to work this evening, tired as you was, and though you'd got all your time afore you—"

Denis coloured and looked rather shamefaced.

"—An' how would it be with a stranger who hopped upon it unexpected and unprepared for such a swag? But we'll keep a good look-out and a good heart. And now we'll turn in." He broke off, as if he had suddenly run dry.

They turned into the wagon for the night, and Denis noticed that Culmer examined his revolver and placed his rifle close to his hand, and Denis followed his example. It was



easy enough to turn in, but not so easy to sleep. Denis lay awake listening to the plash of the mountain rill, the breathing of the horses, the call of the night-bird, and thinking of the possibilities before him; and when he at last fell asleep, he dreamed that he was standing up to his neck in opals, and that he was surrounded by a circle of ruffians—such as he had seen on his way—threatening him with bulging eyes and the latest pattern revolvers and bowie-knives.

When he awoke the next morning, he found that Culmer had got the breakfast and unpacked a couple of axes, and only the axes.

"We'll cut down some o' those trees, and get things ship-shape first. Then we shall be prepared for visitors—if they come."

Denis found that felling trees is harder work than downing a man, and that in the former business Culmer could give him fifty up—easy. But he stuck to it with a determination and pluck which met with Culmer's silent approval and admiration. By the end of the second day they had cleared a space large enough to hold the wagon and form a shelter for the horses. Round this they managed—with the aid of the horses—to drag and pile up the trees and branches into a kind of barrier, so that they were pretty well laagered. From this little fortress their rifles could sweep the opal ground.

"Hard work, ain't it, Mr. Denis?" remarked Mr. Culmer, as they sank full length on the ground, their hands beneath their heads, their eyes turned expectantly on the simmering kettle.

"It makes me laugh sometimes when I think o' the quantities o' young gentlemen as comes over here from the old country. There's some o' 'em as never did a day's work in their lives, and wouldn't touch a spade or heave a basket in England, for pride's sake. And they come out here thinkin' it's a kind o' game, an' they're goin' to have an easy time of it. And they find they're to break stones and cut down trees, and work a damn sight harder and nastier than the labourers on their fathers' places in England—and for less wages, as often as not! Pride's a hard task-master, Mr. Denis."

"Hard work never killed anybody," said Denis, cheerfully. "As for me, I like it. I'd sooner fell trees and tend sheep than sit at a desk all day, Culmer."

"Ah! would you now, sir?" said Culmer, grimly. "You wait," he added, significantly. "Wait till you come across some o' those poor chaps worn to skin and bone for the want o' a square meal. I bet they'd be glad enough to find them-

selves on an office-stool, and within reach of a London restarong, and some of those juicy chops you and Mr. Sedley and me was eatin'."

As they were having their supper the moon rose—a moon as big as a cheese, which lit up the opal ground as if a hundred electric lamps had been turned on. They got their pipes, but Denis could not remain still, and he got up, went through the gap in the barricade, and, sauntering on to the mysterious, "bewitching" patch of rock, looked round him wistfully.

Presently Culmer came up behind him and thrust a pick in his hand. He said not a word, but nodded towards the ground.

Denis flushed, glanced at Culmer's grave face, then walked—he had hard work to keep himself from running—to a boulder and began to work. Culmer stood by smoking his pipe and watching in a silence which seemed almost oppressive. The perspiration started afresh to Denis's sunburnt face, his eyes felt hot, his mouth dry. The rock was hard—very hard; it seemed just like any other rock. A doubt—scarcely a doubt—of the reality of the presence of the precious stones was creeping insidiously into his mind. Then suddenly he saw a speck of light, like a glow-worm or the last embers of a match.

It was red and green and blue, that tiny speck, and it struck Denis in the eye, so to speak, like a fleck of fire.

He dropped the pick, and darted upon the gem as if he were afraid that it would take to itself wings and fly away, or, mole-like, dive into the ground again.

But he had it in his hand—opened his palm, and there it lay. An opal, a gem worth money—gold!

His face paled somewhat, and he looked from Culmer to the gem and back again speechlessly.

Culmer nodded.

"That's number one, lad," he said, laconically.

"It is—it is an opal?" asked Denis, as if he scarcely dared believe.

"It's an opal, right enough," said Culmer, "and a fine one," he added, looking at it as it lay in Denis's palm.

"Not but what there's many better."

Denis drew a long breath and held the stone out to him; but Culmer shook his head.

"It's the first one, and you shall keep it all to yourself for luck, Denis," he said. "Don't say no; I'd like you to have it—just for luck."

He walked away as he spoke, feeling, with a delicacy

scarcely to be expected of him, that Denis would like to be alone. Perhaps he remembered how he himself had felt when he struck his first stone.

Denis sat down on the boulder with the opal still lying in his palm. His eyes were wide open, his lips apart, and he was breathing rather hard. He looked like a picture of the Joy of Hope, and a very handsome picture, too. There was a dreamy expression in his eyes. And no wonder; for he was seeing a vision—a vision of Nora, his beautiful, sweet-hearted girl; the girl who had risked her life to save his honour; the girl who had whispered her love for him down by Marishannon Lake. And he saw her standing beside him all in white before the altar, and the clergyman asking: "Wilt thou have this woman to be thy wedded wife?" And the vision made his heart grow warm and set every nerve a-tingle, so that the speck of light quivered in his hand as he looked at it almost reverently; for was it not the first stone of the path to Nora?

Oh, Love, that can consecrate even the mute things that lie in the bosom of the earth, how mighty art thou!

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## CHAPTER XXII.

It was very strange, but here was Nora, fresh from the country, absolutely verdant and inexperienced, and yet she had slipped into her place as if it had been ready-made and waiting for her. Perhaps it was. We talk a great deal about fate and chance, but we don't know much about them, after all. Theatrical people hang together much closer than those in other professions, and Nora saw a great many actors and actresses.

Miss Temple, notwithstanding her hot temper, was rather a favourite, and friends often dropped into her dressing-room during the evening. Some of them were out of an engagement—beg pardon! "resting"—others came before and after the play was over. And they one and all noticed the beautiful girl who sat so quietly in a corner of the tiny room, mending lace, sewing on gold fringe or stage jewels; and of course they asked questions.

One or two of Miss Temple's fellow-actresses begged her to let Miss Merton—they called each other by their Christian or nicknames, but they always spoke of Nora as "Miss Merton," with the respect which was the due of one who looked so refined and was so quiet and ladylike—come and do some needlework for them.

So it happened that Nora went behind the scenes of other

theatres. For one, she went to the Duke's. The Duke's, as everybody knows, is the home of melodrama, and the actress who employed Nora was none other than the leading lady, Miss Yorke. She played the heroine who is persecuted and sorely entreated, who suffers shipwreck, kidnapping, and all kinds of martyrdom through three acts, and comes out triumphant in the fourth, in which she invariably marries the hero—who has also had a bad time of it—and is happy with him ever after; at any rate, it is to be hoped she is.

She was a good actress, and, what is better still, an amiable young woman, and she took a great fancy to Nora, and made much of her.

In a way she protected her. Not that Nora needed any protection, for she was quite able to take care of herself, as some of the gentlemen who crossed her path quickly discovered.

They might "chaff" their friends, the actresses, call them Lotty and Polly, invite them to supper, make love to them on every possible and impossible occasion; but somehow they felt that Nora was unapproachable. She was sweet and amiable, and always the pink of maidenly courtesy—while they remained respectful; but directly they showed any sign of advancing—or should it be, derogating?—she became as cold as ice and as distant as the North Pole.

Miss Yorke and Dora Moberley were delighted and amazed at her power of keeping the men at arm's-length, and the former complimented her upon it.

Nora flushed and bent over her work in silence. She could not explain to them that there was only one man in the world for her, and that all the others—well, did not count.

The plays at the Duke's interested her very much more than did those at the Empress, and when she had time she would stand at the wings—it was singular, but the stage-manager, who was rather grumpy, would permit her to stand there, though he refused to allow any one else to do so—and watch the stirring drama with keen attention and interest. It was so new to her as to seem real; but though she was as excited as the audience in front, she kept her critical faculty in working order, and was keenly alive to some of the inconsistencies, not to say absurdities, in the acting and the play itself. This was, perhaps, because she was so fresh; or, perhaps, because she was really clever.

And when she came home at night, she would talk the proceedings over with Dora in a fashion that equally surprised and amused that astute young person.

"You seem to notice everything, Olive," she remarked one evening as she lay on the bed smoking a cigarette, while Nora talked as she bent over some work.

"Do I?" said Nora, modestly. "I don't think I do more than others. Everybody must see the things I see. Now, in this new play they are doing at the Duke's—it's a very good one, I should think—it makes me laugh and cry, and—and tremble sometimes; but then sometimes one feels one must laugh in the wrong place. Miss Yorke is always in such awful trouble. Surely nobody could be so wretched for so long together without a break; and perhaps she thinks so, or she wouldn't do such funny things."

"How do you mean?" asked Dora.

"Well," said Nora, rather hesitatingly, as if she felt that it was presumptuous of her to criticise, "the first time she gets into trouble—it's when her father is ruined—she lets her hair down; and afterwards it always comes down when she is harassed and upset. I don't think people's hair gets loose like that. Then she throws her arms above her head and draws a long breath—like this—and stares up at the gallery as if she were in pain."

"Of course; that's the way it's always done," remarked Dora.

"Is it?" said Nora, meekly. "Well, I daresay it is all right. And then there's the hero. In this play he is shipwrecked."

"They always are."

"Yes; and he swims with Miss Yorke in his arms, oh! for ever so many miles; and when they come out, his clothes aren't wet, and her hair is beautifully done, and she looks almost as if she had just left the dressing-room."

Dora laughed.

"So they do."

"Yes. And after they have been on the desert island for some weeks, Mr. Ralston's—the hero's—shirt-sleeves are beautifully clean, and Miss Yorke is as neat as possible—just as if they had swum ashore together with all their clothes and clean things."

"So they do. That's funny. I never noticed it before," said Dora.

"And then, why does everybody, when they go out of the room in a hurry, smack the door with the palm of their hand before they open it? It isn't only one person who does it, but everybody."

Dora laughed.

"Some great actor did it once, and everybody imitates him, I suppose," she conjectured, shrewdly, and, no doubt, correctly.

"Then the other people on the stage—the crowd of villagers, and so on—all say the same thing exactly at the same time, and when they are not speaking they stand and look at the audience in the stalls; and sometimes they smile so that I can't help remembering that they are not real villagers, but only 'supers,' as you call them. Then there's the music—"

"Oh, come! it's a capital band at the Duke's," remonstrated Dora.

"Yes, beautiful; and I could listen to it forever; but why do the men with the fiddles begin to play softly directly anything particularly sad or dreadful is going to happen, and go on playing—always the same kind of tune—all through it?"

"They always do and did," said Dora. "It works the people, and keeps 'em on the *qui vive*—the strain, you know."

"Does it?" said Nora, rather doubtfully. "It irritates me. Anyhow, I would get them to play a different tune sometimes—if you can call it a tune. And then there's another thing—but you are thinking this like my 'cheek!'" and she smiled her rare smile as she ventured on the piece of slang.

"Oh, no, I don't," said Dora. "I like to hear you. Go on."

"Well, I was going to say that whenever Miss Yorke is in trouble, she flings herself on a sofa or a chair, or comes down to the footlights and covers her face with her handkerchief."

"What else could the poor woman do?" asked Dora.

"I don't know. But when she does that, it makes her look as if her nose had suddenly begun to bleed; and when I don't think of that, I'm taken up by noticing the lace round her handkerchief, and that makes me forget the story of the play, and her trouble; and that can't be right."

"H'm! there's a deal in what you say," commented Dora. "My dear, you'll have to take a theatre and show us how to do it."

Nora blushed and laughed, and of course ceased her criticisms instantly. But though she did not ventilate her opinions, she continued "noticing," like a precocious child. And she did more. She had a wonderfully retentive memory, and, almost unconsciously, she got a great deal of the play by heart—not only Miss Yorke's part, but those of the other actresses; and when she was sitting quietly in a corner of the dressing-room, or at home, she repeated what she had learned—not in parrot fashion, but as naturally as she could, and in

the way in which she considered it should be said. Once or twice she found herself walking about the bedroom, as if it were a stage, and acting the parts.

Between you and me, this is the way your true actor always begins.

But Nora did not know she was "beginning," or she would probably have left off. She had no idea of going on the stage. She was almost happy and content with the work that had fallen to her. She had discovered that it is hard enough to earn one's bread in London, and that the getting a step up the ladder—she meant getting nearer to Denis—was not to be thought of. But it amused her, when she was alone, to go over the parts in this way, and she continued it.

One night she was in Miss Yorke's dressing-room, sewing a bow on a tiny shoe. It was early—that is to say, the orchestra had not got into its place—and the audience were just coming in for the first piece. Miss Yorke was changing for her part, and sipping the egg and milk which she always took before going on.

"There you are then, my dear!" she said in her pleasant voice. "You always remind me of a mouse—or Cinderella—you sit so quiet and mum-like. Not that you are in rags, or dusty," she added, with a laugh, and a kindly admiration in her eyes. "Don't you ever feel tired of stitching and mending, Miss Merton?"

"Tired? No," said Nora, smiling. "It is not hard work."

Miss Yorke yawned and shrugged her shoulders.

"Not so hard as mine, though I daresay you don't think it."

"I think yours is very hard," said Nora, honestly. "But it must be very interesting."

"Yes, I suppose it is," assented the leading lady. "But I don't realise it to-night. I've got a headache—and they make such a noise! Listen to them now. There's something wrong, I suppose; but I always wonder why they should come and squabble outside my dressing-room," and she laughed.

Some one knocked at the door, and the stage-manager was let in.

"I came to see whether you were dressed, Miss Yorke," he said.

"Dressed? No; I haven't begun," she replied. "Why?"

"Well, I'm afraid we shall have to cut out the first piece, and begin with the drama."

"Cut out the first piece! Good gracious! why?"

"Miss Graham, who plays Mary, has been suddenly taken ill."

"Well, you can get some one else! The part is only a small one. She only has to speak a few lines, and there are plenty of girls here who can do it."

"So I should think," he said, drily; "but Mr. Sedley, the author, doesn't agree with me. He's been round, and—well, he'd rather the first piece wasn't played than— Oh, here he is! Miss Yorke isn't dressed, Mr. Sedley, and we shall have to put some one on to play Miss Graham's part."

Sedley stood just inside the door, and raised his hat to Miss Yorke and Nora. He was looking red and worried, and a little obstinate.

Now, as a rule, the author has to give way to the stage-manager, but there were reasons why the stage-manager at the Duke's was desirous of pleasing Mr. Sedley. For one thing, he was the editor of the *Coronet*, and somewhat a power in the dramatic world; for another, he was coming to the front as a dramatic author, and the Duke's wanted his next play—a strong one. So the stage-manager stood with his hands in his pockets, the picture of resignation and martyrdom, as Sedley began in his somewhat curt and brusque way:

"I don't want the piece played, Miss Yorke, if I can't get a suitable Mary, and I can't. The part is a small one enough; but the play's ruined, simply ruined, unless the Mary is—is— Well, Miss Graham just fitted it, and no one here would—unless it were yourself."

Miss Yorke smiled. "I'd play it for you," she said, good-naturedly, "but I dare not! What would the manager say if I appeared in a first piece?"

"I know," he admitted; "but you see my fix? I want—I *must* have—a lady like you who can throw some sympathy into the part. The play hangs upon it, small as it is. There's no one here who can play it, and I can't afford to have the piece ruined. So much depends—"

While he had been talking, he had glanced, now and again, and almost unconsciously, at Nora; but suddenly his glance became fixed, and he paused and regarded her steadily. If there is one thing your dramatist prides himself upon—rightly or wrongly—it is the faculty of "spotting" the actors and actresses for his characters, and Sedley really had a keen eye for this business; and it struck him, like a flash of lightning, that this lovely girl, who sat so quietly, so composedly, in the corner, was an ideal "Mary."



When Mr. Talbot Sedley wanted a thing, he was not backwards in his endeavour to get it; and at once, without any of the hesitation or shyness which would have hampered ordinary mortals, he said, abruptly:

"Excuse me; is that young lady one of the company?"

"Who—Miss Merton?" said Miss Yorke. "Oh, no! She is the young lady who sees to my dresses and things; and very nicely she does it. My treasure, I call her. Why? Did you think of asking her to play the part?" She laughed. "My dear, do you think you could play Mary in Mr. Sedley's 'Forgotten'?"

To her dying day Nora will never know why she did not say "No," with the usual blush and timidity. But she did not. Instead, she said, quite quietly:

"I don't know."

Miss Yorke looked at her and smiled.

"'Pon my word, you'd *look* it, at any rate. What a pity you aren't an actress!"

"You've seen the part played?" said Sedley.

"Oh, yes," said Nora; "I have seen it several times. So often, that I know the words by heart."

She spoke as quietly as before, and setting down the shoe, took up another piece of work.

"You know the words—and the business, perhaps?" said Sedley.

The stage-manager looked at him with surprise. Was the hard-headed, practical Mr. Talbot Sedley idiot enough to imagine that a "green" hand, an outsider, could be entrusted with a speaking part at the Duke's!

"Come along," he said. "I'll step in front and make an excuse for not playing the thing."

"Wait a moment," said Sedley, with more coolness than he had as yet displayed. "Would you mind, Miss—Miss Merton, standing up and going through it with me?"

Nora went pale, but looked at him steadily.

"Why?" she asked. "You would not let me play it?" And she smiled.

"Let's see," he said. "Here, I'll be the other character—"

"—No, I'll do that. Give me the words," said Miss Yorke, still laughing.

She took up the proper position, and repeating the first few words after Sedley, remembered and delivered the remainder without prompting. Nora played up to her. She made no mistake, not in a word. And, strange to say, her rendering,

though unlike that of the original representative, was natural and effective. Of course it was not perfect; but there was something in it that brought the blood to Sedley's face and the light to his eyes.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed the stage-manager, under his breath.

Almost forgetting himself, Sedley caught Nora by the arm.

"The dress—the dress!" he said, almost fiercely. "Where is it? Get it on, sharp!"

"Oh, I can't allow—" began the stage-manager; but Sedley turned on him quickly:

"It's all right, I'll risk it! I'll take the responsibility!"

"She'll have stage-fright and break down!" remarked the manager, in accents of despair.

"No, she won't. You will not?" said Sedley.

Nora was pale enough, but she smiled at him gravely, and shook her head.

"No," said she. "Why should I?"

"Let her do it," said Miss Yorke, with a kind of suppressed excitement. "Leave her to me for a few minutes while you get the dress." And she bundled the two men out.

"You know what this means, my dear?" she said, as she closed the door. "It means that you are going on the stage. If you want to take to it, this is one of those chances—well, they come once in a century, I should think. Are you sure—do you *feel* as if you could get through it? It is not a trifle—the people, the lights, the excitement."

Nora stood with her lips tightly closed, her brows drawn; as she had often stood poised on a narrow shelf of rock over the lake; as she had often stood with the helm of the boat in her hand, when it was a toss up whether she should ever reach the shore.

"Yes," she said. "I can do it."

"Then do it!" exclaimed Miss Yorke, as tragically as if she were on the stage.

The two men came back with the dress, and Miss Yorke herself hurried Nora into it. Then she made her sit down and take some of the egg and milk.

"You sit quiet for a few minutes and then we'll go through the part again," she said. "Thank Heaven, it's only a small one."

The orchestra began to play, the usual row in the gallery made itself heard; then the music ceased; the curtain was up, the little piece beginning.

Miss Yorke took Nora by the hand and led her to the wings.

"Stand here till you get your cue. Don't look at the house; don't look at it all the while you are on. Give me your hand again. Why, it doesn't tremble!"

"No; but my heart does," said Nora. But she spoke steadily enough.

A moment or two afterwards her cue came and she stepped on to the stage.

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### CHAPTER XXIII.

THE first time of facing a large audience is an unpleasant business. One gets hot and cold—feverishly hot and icily cold—all in a moment; there is a weakness about the knees, and a dimness of sight, a failure of voice, sometimes so complete that the unhappy mortal can only stand and gasp at the crowd before him like a codfish out of water. This deplorable condition is called "stage-fright," and attacks every one, more or less, on their first public appearance.

It attacked Nora, and she suffered agonies for a moment or two; then she remembered how much depended upon her—the whole of the little play, Mr. Sedley had said. How angry and disappointed he would be if she broke down; how terribly thrown out her fellow-actors would be—in fact, in a lightning flash, she thought of all the consequences of failure, and called upon the spirit within her.

And it rose at her command, as it had risen many a time of old at Marishannon, when she had been in mortal terror from which only pluck and self-possession could rescue her.

But, for a time, for several moments, she scarcely heard her own voice, scarcely knew whether she was moving or standing still. Then this kind of trance left her, and she realised what she was doing, and, more important still, what to do, and how to do it.

It was a small part, as has been said; but Nora played it upon the lines which she had laid out for herself—that is, naturally and unstagily. It was not a part in which she could score heavily; the house did not "rise at her," or break into a storm of applause, or anything of that kind—but it watched, and listened to her, with marked attention, and, when she made her rather effective exit, it applauded her generously—as an audience always applauds when it sees that the player is doing his best, and is anxious to do his duty.

As she went off, Sedley, who had waited at the wings, watching her closely and a little nervously, caught her by the arm and held her, looking at her earnestly.

"Thank you, my dear!" he said. It is usual to call an actress, especially a young one, "my dear," and no disrespect is intended. "You have done very well, very well indeed!"

"I am glad you are pleased," Nora said, in her quiet, modest way; and she went past him towards the dressing-room. The stage-manager stood not far off, and, though he said nothing, he nodded pleasantly: stage-managers do not give way to enthusiasm.

One of the actors who had been playing with her stepped up to her and said a few words of congratulation, and the others looked at her curiously, and—the truth must be written—not altogether amicably. You see, here was a fresh arrival on a field already overcrowded!

As she entered Miss Yorke's dressing-room, that lady turned from her glass and held out her hand.

"Bravo, my dear!" she said; and there was some little excitement in her voice and manner. "You did it splendidly! It was really good, and not—that is, not *very* amateurish; and what there was will wear off in time. It is astonishing that you should have done it at all!"

Nora smiled gratefully, slipped off her stage dress, got into her own as quickly, and took up her work as if nothing had happened. But Miss Yorke said, quietly:

"Put that down, my dear."

"Why?" asked Nora, with faint surprise.

"Why! Is it likely I should let you do work for me now? Why, you are an actress, and above that kind of work!"

"No, I am not an actress; and I am not above it," said Nora. "Please let me finish it"—for Miss Yorke had made to take it out of her hand—"or—or I shall be sorry I played the part."

Miss Yorke looked at her curiously.

"You are a strange girl, my dear!" she said. "Very strange! Most girls would have had their heads turned by such a success, and have thought that kind of work beneath them—as it certainly is beneath you."

Nora shook her head. "Perhaps I shall never play again," she said, with a touch of her Irish shrewdness; "then I should have lost the substance for the shadow."

Miss Yorke stared at her, exclaimed, "Well!" and resumed her "making-up"; but every now and then she paused, and looked in the glass at the reflection of the beautiful face behind her, with a puzzled expression. Meanwhile, Sedley and the stage-manager were discussing the novice.

"It was a remarkable performance, Johnson," Sedley de-

clared, walking up and down the stage-manager's den, and rumpling his hair excitedly. Johnson grunted. "Remarkable! In fact, phenomenal, considering that it was her first appearance."

"Was it?" muttered Johnson, cynically.

"Wasn't it?" demanded Sedley, stopping short.

"How the devil do I know? If you ask me, my opinion is that it wasn't. If it was, then I never saw any one so cool and all-there."

"Just so!" assented Sedley, eagerly. "And she wasn't only cool and self-possessed, but *good*—really good. I've been round to the front, and I tell you she made a distinct impression."

"They always do when they've got a face like that girl's," said Johnson, cynically.

"Oh! she's beautiful enough—she's lovely, in fact," admitted Sedley. "But it wasn't her face alone."

"The girl's got a good voice," grunted Johnson.

"It's music, and expressive music, too! And I needn't tell you, John, that that is rare."

"It are," assented Johnson, grimly. "But what is all this tending to, Mr. Sedley? For I can see you have something on your mind."

Sedley coloured slightly; then he replied, in his quiet but decisive way:

"Well, of course, you'll give her the part while Miss Graham's away; and—"

"You'll want us to give her a part in your new play?" said Johnson, with a grin.

Sedley nodded.

"I thought so. Well, you'll do as you like, of course. I'll speak to the gov'nor about it"—the governor was the all-powerful manager—"he isn't fond of novices, as you know; but I expect he'll waive his prejudices in her favour, if you insist on it. Though I needn't remind you, Mr. Sedley, that a girl sometimes scores in one piece and makes a mess of it in every other."

Sedley nodded.

"This girl will not make a mess of it," he said. "Do you know where she comes from?" he asked, after a pause.

Johnson shook his head.

"Not the least idea. Nobody knows. Yes; I've asked, for I saw what was in your mind. She's a friend of little Dora Moberley's; lives with her, I believe; and does work for the actresses. In fact, she's a seamstress—"

"And a genius, if I'm not mistaken," said Sedley, under his breath.

Johnson grunted rather incredulously.

"I've heard of that rare animal several times," he said; "but I can't say I've met with it—extinct, like the dodo, I should imagine," he added, as he went off to superintend the setting of the first scene of the drama.

Nora went up to the wings, after her work was done, and watched the playing. It can easily be understood that she did so with a keener interest than ever—for was she not an actress, if only for one night!—and, having been through the fire, she was fain to admit that, notwithstanding all her stage tricks, Miss Yorke was a splendid actress.

"I wonder whether I should ever be able to make them cry, and shout, and cheer, as she does?" she asked herself, as she walked home. Then, as she went through the quiet streets, another thought smote her. Every day—every hour of the day—she had thought of Denis, and wondered whether he was in London. What if he had chanced to be at the Duke's to-night and had seen her! Would he have been pleased and proud, and have loved her better, or would he have been displeased and ashamed of her? For Nora had learnt, amongst other things, that there is a wide gulf between the social status of the actor and the man of rank. But, if he had been there, she felt that she should have known it, somehow. How, she did not ask herself, seeing that the great crowd had only been seen by her through a kind of mist. But, yes, she felt she should have known!

Every day, every night she had walked home, she told herself that she might meet him—meet him quite suddenly—see his face, hear his voice; and her heart had beat fast at the thought. But day succeeded day, and she had not see him; and she had realised quite early that two persons might live in London all their lives and never meet.

Dora was at home when Nora got there, and looked up from the coffee-pot with a nod and a smile.

"Well, my dear, done with the needle for to-night? Coffee's ready, and— What's the matter—what's happened?" she broke off, for her sharp eyes had detected a subtle something in Nora's face. It was not that it was triumphant or excited—indeed, there was rather a dreamy look in the lovely eyes; but the something was there—the dawning of a hope—the satisfaction of an achievement.

Nora, as she took off her jacket, told her, quietly and modestly enough.

"What are you waiting for? Going to ask for two guineas? You're right to!"

Nora shook her head.

"No, no!" she said. "I was doubting whether I should say yes or no—"

"Then think about it after you have sent the note!" retorted Dora, sharply. "Quick! Fortune's knocking at the door, my dear. Let her in, or she'll turn away; and once she's gone, she's not likely to come back. Write, or I shall have a fit of hysterics!"

Nora laughed shyly, and wrote, accepting; and as Dora bore off the letter, taking three steps at a time at first, and then more slowly, and with a dignity which she trusted would impress the messenger with Miss Merton's condescension, Nora leant her head on her hand, and murmured:

"Am I getting nearer to him, or farther away?" For it was not of her good fortune she thought, but of Denis—always Denis.

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#### CHAPTER XXIV.

MISS GRAHAM did not come back—her "indisposition" proved to be a runaway match with a young viscount—and Nora continued to play Mary to the satisfaction of the stage-manager and the delight of Mr. Sedley.

At the end of the week she drew six guineas from the "treasury," and sent her mother four of them, with a line or two, saying that she had found work, and was happy. She did not give any address, and posted the letter at the other end of London, so that the office-stamp should afford no clue.

"I suppose you'll leave me now, and set up diggings in a swell part of the town?" said Dora, with affected indifference; but Nora shook her head, and looked at her reproachfully.

"I shall never leave you till you tell me to go," she replied.

"Or until you marry some swell," said Dora. "There, don't blush. You're just the kind of girl who marries into the peerage. Look at Miss Graham—and she wasn't a patch upon you, my dear. Never mind; we'll wait till the good time—it will be a bad time for me—comes; and, meanwhile, if we're going to club together, I vote we take the sitting-room next to this. We can afford it. It's rather awkward, if any one calls, only having a bedroom."

Nora agreed to this willingly. They took the room, and made it nice, almost "swellish," as Dora said; but they lived

as plainly as before, and every week Nora was able to send the greater portion of her salary to her mother.

Meanwhile, she was learning her profession. One often reads of young ladies who bounce upon the stage, and make a great success as Juliet or Desdemona at their first appearance; but they exist only in the pages of the novelist, and one does not meet with them in real life. Acting has to be learned, like every other profession or trade; and it is the person who sticks at it with industry, perseverance, and intelligence who wins. And, even with these qualities at hand, it is hard work. Nora not only played her own part at the theatre, but tried others in the little sitting-room at home. She read Shakespeare and the other standard dramatists; and went to the matinees at other theatres, taking note of everything, and trying to improve upon what she saw others doing.

Presently Mr. Sedley's new drama was announced as in preparation; and one evening he came to her dressing-room with a roll of paper in his hand. Nora was just going, and they stood in the corridor while Sedley, in his abrupt, brusque fashion, said:

"I've brought you your part in the new play, and I hope you'll accept and like it, Miss Merton."

The blood rushed to Nora's face, and her eyes shone upon him gratefully.

"Oh, Mr. Sedley!" was all she could say for a moment. "Do you think I—I can do it?"

Sedley laughed.

"Your modesty is quite refreshing," he said, "it's so rare. Now, all the others will politely tell me that their parts aren't good enough for 'em. Perhaps you, too, will when you've read it. You'd better take it home, and tell me what you think of it to-morrow."

Nora hugged the roll to her bosom, and sped home to read the type-written pages.

It was not a long part, or the principal—of course, Miss Yorke had that—but it was a good one. Nora found that she was to be in love with her sister's sweetheart; that through two acts she was to try to lure him with all a woman's wiles from his allegiance; to fail, and to expiate her offence by dying in the snow outside her father's church; of course, to the music of the organ and the choir coming sweetly through the lighted, stained-glass windows. It was not particularly new and original, but it took Nora's fancy, and she began at once to "get outside" the part. There was no need for Mr. Sedley to ask her, next day, if she liked it.



"If I can only play it!" she murmured, with a sigh and a lighting of the eyes.

"Oh, you'll play it right enough," he said, with gruff but kind encouragement.

There were three weeks for rehearsal, and, during that three weeks, Nora was no longer herself, but Lucy, as the character was called. She thought of nothing else—excepting Denis—from early morn to dewy eve. Before breakfast she fell to work, and, during the day, as she walked in the parks, or through the crowded streets, she went through her lines, altering here and polishing there; and at night, after her work at the Duke's was over, she paced up and down the sitting-room, repeating particular sentences, and practising her "business."

As has been hinted, Nora had some rather original ideas about acting, and she resolved, from the first moment of reading the play, that she would not follow the conventional actions and attitudes. She had never seen any one die—certainly not outside a church, and during a snowstorm!—but she tried to imagine how a person, a weary, broken-hearted girl, would get through the painful business, and she fancied that she had hit upon the right way. The audience, on the first night—and the critics—would inform her whether she was right or not.

At the rehearsals, she had not to go through the business, so that no one knew of her intentions; and she delivered her lines so well that Mr. Sedley, and even the stage-manager, felt no anxiety or apprehension.

Of course she talked the part over with Dora, but that young lady frankly admitted she could not give any advice or assistance.

"It's out of my line, you see, dear," she said. "Now, if it was a bit of a burlesque, a song or a dance—well, I dare say I could give you a tip as well as any one; but I don't go in for melodrama. But don't you worry about it. It's going to be a big success, mark my words! Why, I've listened to you as you've been going through your part—do you know that you talk about it in your sleep?—and it's almost made me cry. Almost; not quite, because I'm not one of the crying sort. Oh, it will be all right."

The last rehearsal came and went, and the first night arrived. The play had been staged in the lavish way peculiar to the Duke's, and every one felt pretty confident; every one, perhaps, but Sedley and Nora. The former went about with a grave and preoccupied manner, and Nora was more than usually silent and dreamy; but she was not nervous in the

ordinary acceptance of the term. A kind of suppressed excitement, as if every nerve were braced up to its tightest, was the state in which Miss Yorke found her when she came to Nora's dressing-room just before the curtain rang up.

"I thought I would just look in for a moment, to see how you were getting on, dear," said the kind-hearted woman. "I know what it is to play a biggish part for the first time, and I can understand what you feel like. But you don't look very upset!" she added, looking hard at the lovely face, on which was neither the flush nor the pallor which indicates nervousness.

"No?" said Nora. "But I am trembling inside," and she smiled.

"That doesn't matter so long as you don't let any one see it," said the experienced actress, "and I don't fancy you'll do that. There is a tremendous house; I never saw the place so crammed before; and Mr. Johnson tells me that all the critics are here. They sit in the stalls, as you know, dear; and, if I were you, I would try not to see them."

"I shan't see any one in the house; I never do."

"That's right! What a pretty dress that is!"

Nora wore a charming morning dress in the first act; a dress which was simple enough, but which in colour and style suited her exactly; perhaps because she had chosen and bought it herself.

"At any rate, you will score in the beginning."

"It is the end I am afraid of," said Nora, quietly.

"Well, you don't look very frightened!" commented Miss Yorke. "But, then, don't you give way, dear. I have just left Miss Soames in tears; and she has a much smaller part than yours."

"And you are not at all nervous, and the play depends upon you!" Nora could not help remarking.

Miss Yorke laughed.

"I am an old hand, you see," she said; "and I know exactly what to do, and where to have them. You'll learn that in time, and take the whole as easily as—as putting on a pair of new gloves. There's the bell! I must go. Good luck to you, my dear; nobody will be more glad if you get a success than I shall be!"

She nodded and smiled, and glided out, and Nora finished dressing, and sat down in a chair to wait for her call.

It seemed as if it would never come, but presently she heard "Lucy," and she went up to the wings, got her cue, and walked on.

It is not too much to say that her appearance caused a sensation. Not one of intense excitement, but one of genuine pleasure and admiration; she looked so exquisite a specimen of girlhood, with her lovely face wearing an expression of pure and innocent happiness, and her graceful form clad in its simple, girlish morning frock. She carried the conventional basket of flowers on her arm, but there was nothing conventional in her mode of entering the stage, or in the clear, natural voice.

There was a murmur of admiration from the audience, and, to her surprise—and, one is sorry to add, the envy of some of the other actresses—a welcome clapping of hands.

The first act went admirably. Miss Yorke had a part which suited her, and played it in her well-known and always effective way; the other actors were well-fitted; the scene was a beautiful and really artistic one, and Nora, though she had not much to do, beyond the portrayal of a dawning affection for the wrong man, did it naturally and well.

The act closed to an accompaniment of applause from the audience, and the critics exchanged smiles and nods which meant "another success," as they went out to the smoking-rooms and refreshment-bars.

Sedley met Miss Yorke and Nora as they were going to their dressing-rooms, and Miss Yorke nodded cheerfully and encouragingly.

"All well so far, Mr. Sedley?" she said.

Sedley nodded.

"Yes, thanks to you," he said, in his sharp way. Then he paused at Nora's side. "How are you feeling—all right?"

Nora smiled, grateful for his notice.

"Yes," she replied. "But my time has to come."

"Don't be afraid," he said, gruffly. "I'm not."

"And yet you ought to be," she said. "Think how untried, how inexperienced, I am!"

"Never you mind," he responded. "Now you go and rest, and don't let any one come and cackle to you. *Really* rest, until your call comes."

Just before the curtain rose on the second act, two men entered the theatre. They were in evening-dress; but, though similarly clad, were very unlike each other. One was Spencer Foyle, tall, thin, and distinguished-looking; the other was a short, thick-set man, with a bull-neck, and features distinctly and emphatically Hebraic. His nose was hooked, his lips were thick, his hair dark and curly, and there was a huge and blinding diamond in his shirt-front. As they made their way

through the vestibule and into the saloon, his small, sharp eyes flashed round, and several persons caught them, and smiled, some shortly, and others with subservience—for Mr. Jacob Levison was rather well known. He was a City man, a financier and company-promoter, and was reputed to be worth untold thousands; and many stories—some fabulous, and not a few unpleasant—were told of the ways in which he had acquired his wealth.

As they stood at the bar, and Foyle sipped his liqueur, he looked round, with his usual languid, cynical air.

"Way the devil have we come here?" he said, with his well-known drawl.

Mr. Jacob Levison shrugged his shoulders.

"I've got two shittalls," he said, slightly through his nose. "But we needn't go in, unless you like. I want to talk to you, and I couldn't do it at the club"—Foyle had been dining with him at one of those new and luxurious clubs which spring up mushroom-fashion, and dwindle and die out as rapidly as they rise—"because there was a fellow listening at the next table. I want to tell you about this Australian venture of mine. 'Ave a cigarette?"

Foyle shook his head, and took a cigarette from his own case. He was as languid, as indifferent as usual, and the wealthy Jew looked at him admiringly; for Foyle was the sort of man men like Mr. Jacob Levison always admire and attempt to imitate.

"It'sh a good thing, Foyle—a splendid thing," he said, through his nose, and in a whisper.

Foyle looked at his cigarette in an uninterested manner, which only impressed the Jew more deeply, and made him more eager.

"There's hundreds of acres, and right in the gold-bearing line—or—that is—"

Foyle nodded, with a cynical smile.

"Of course you'd say there was gold there," he said, languidly.

"But there ish—or there ought to be, my boy!" said Mr. Levison, with a wink. "Ain't there gold all over Aushtralia? Very well, then, and why shouldn't it be there? That'sh what I ask you!"

"Well?" said Foyle, interrogatively.

"Well, thish land is in the handsh of a couple of green-horns. They bought it for sheep-farmin'. Sheep-farmin' is rot."

Foyle nodded.

"And they've found that out. And they want to sell. I heard it from their agent over here. They'd sell cheap, and I'm inclined to buy. It would make a splendid company—splendid! There's thousands, half a million in it!"

Foyle nodded again.

"Yes?" he said, indifferently. Then he fixed his keen eyes on Levison. "And where do I come in?"

"That'sh what I was comin' to," said the Jew. "I want some one—a gentleman, not a nobody, but a gentleman like you, Foyle—to go over and see the place."

Foyle smiled incredulously.

"What need for that?" he asked. "You don't want to see it. The public will take your word."

Mr. Levison smiled. How often had the public taken his word—and he taken the public's money in consequence!

"That'sh all right; but this is a big affair, and I want some one I can depend upon to go over and get an expert to report that there's gold there. See?"

Foyle nodded. The two men seated themselves at one of the marble tables. The electric bell which announced the immediate rising of the curtain had rung, and they were alone.

"I see," he said.

"Yesh!" assented Levison, with suppressed eagerness. "I want some one who'll go over and work the whole business from that side—the whole of it, mind. I give 'im a free hand—and I give 'im a third of the makes. And I tell you, that won't be under a hundred thousand pounds."

Foyle smiled in silence for a moment or so, then he said:

"You want me to go over to this place, procure a bogus 'expert's opinion,' send you bogus reports, and, in fact, work the thing generally?"

"My boy, you've hit it!" exclaimed Mr. Levison, admiringly. "You've put the thing in a nutshell."

"And you offer a third?" said Foyle.

"That'sh it. It's liberal, it's foolishly liberal; but, mind you, Foyle, I wouldn't offer it to anybody but you; and, damn it, I don't know why I offer it to you, only that I like you—and I can trust you"—"ash far ash I can see you," he added, under his breath.

Foyle knocked the ash off his cigarette deliberately.

"Well, I'll think it over," he said. "Where is the place?"

"In Australia," replied Mr. Levison, airily.

"That's rather a vague address. Australia is a large place."

Mr. Levison leered knowingly.

"I'll tell you when we sign our little agreement," he said.

"If we sign it," remarked Foyle. "I am not particularly keen about it, Levison."

Mr. Levison stole a glance at his companion, then gazed before him reflectingly.

"No? Well, I should 'ave thought you'd 'ave liked a trip. Especially just now, when they talk of rakin' up that Bonanza Mine business. You wash in that, washn't you? It 'ud be awkward, havin' to appear in the witness-box and answer questions, wouldn't it, Foyle?"

Spencer Foyle smiled.

"You won't frighten me about the Bonanza Mine, Levison," he said. "But I don't say you won't persuade me into going into that Australian business. I'll think it over. Let us go and see the show."

He got up, apparently quite indifferent, and, Levison following, went towards the stalls.

The second act was half through; the play had gone well; the audience was pleased. Miss Yorke had been the central figure, but Nora had charmed them, fascinated them, with her display of womanly cunning. Though she had the "wicked woman" part, she had managed to share their sympathy with Miss Yorke.

Foyle sauntered into his stall, and looked—not at the stage, but round the house. Melodrama was not much in his way. It does not amuse a villain to see a stage specimen of the genus; and he cannot be expected to regard the triumph of virtue with satisfaction.

But presently he looked towards the stage. It was at the moment of one of Nora's entrances, and in an instant of time Spencer Foyle's indifference and contempt had vanished, fled.

He leant forward, his face flushed, his breath coming fast. Then he dropped back, and smiled with cynical self-scorn. It had been considered necessary that Nora should wear a wig. Every self-respecting girl who dies in a churchyard, and in a snowstorm, does so with yellow hair flowing down her back, and, notwithstanding Nora's protests, the stage-manager had been firm and immovable. So she had been obliged to put on the light flowing wig, and it had puzzled Spencer Foyle.

The resemblance of this actress to a certain Nora Neil in an out-of-the-way place in Ireland worried him, and he gnawed at his moustache thoughtfully.

"Goin' well, ain't it?" said Mr. Levison. "They're in for another success. Wish I'd taken a share in the place. I

had some offered me. I tell you what, Foyle, that yellar-headed girl don't play badly."

Foyle yawned, but vouchsafed no reply. At the end of the second act, Levison invited him to a drink, but Foyle shook his head, and remained in his seat. This actress in the yellow wig still recalled Nora Neil and Marishannon. He wondered, with a keenness that surprised him, what had become of her.

The third act commenced. Mr. Levison did not return, and Foyle crossed his knees, and spread himself luxuriously over the two seats.

It was the act with the churchyard and snow, the act in which Nora was to score, if she were going to score. The scene was all white, the outline of the graves softened by the snow, the vari-coloured light came softly through the stained windows, the organ and the choir made soft and sad music; and Nora came on in her worn black dress, above which her white, death-stricken face was contrasted dramatically.

Something in the way she walked and moved, something natural and out of the common, struck a sympathetic chord in the heart of the audience. She was walking, moving, as she had done that night on the Embankment—her first night in London—helplessly, wearily, hopelessly. Then she spoke, and her voice, low and eloquent of exhaustion and approaching death, yet clear as a bell and full of that power which works like magic on the hearts of a strung-up audience, told at every word.

It was as if they were looking at the misery of one of their own daughters. She fascinated them, and tears began to rise to the eyes of the women, and the men stealthily got out their pocket-handkerchiefs and blew their noses.

As the scene proceeded, she rose to its demands on her emotion. Her voice quavered with the grief and agony of remorse and penitence, and shook with despair.

A solemn stillness fell upon the audience, and they leant forward in their seats, their eyes fixed upon the solitary black-robed figure on the stage. And the fascination, the spell, held until, with a last wail, a broken sob, like that of the departing spirit, fluttered from her white lips, and she fell dead upon her mother's grave.

There was a moment or two of silence; then the crowded house broke into the loudest and most frantic applause that had been heard, even at the Duke's.

As the curtain fell, the stage-manager sprang across the stage, and raised Nora from the property grave.

"Come on!" he said.

She looked at him, half dazed, and as if she did not see him.

"Come on!" he repeated. "There's a call; and no wonder!"

Nora rose a little unsteadily.

"Is—is it all right?" she asked, vaguely.

"Is it! Good heavens, yes! It's a hit! You've fetched them right enough! Come on!"

He steered her to the edge of the curtain, and gently pushed her on.

A roar—a mighty roar—arose, so deafening that Nora was half frightened, and stood still. Then she crossed the stage in the regulation fashion, and, making her curtsy, disappeared.

And as she did so, Spencer Foyle, who had been leaning forward, with pale face and parted lips, fell back with an oath.

For he had recognised, in the now famous actress, Nora Neil, of Marishannon.

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## CHAPTER XXV.

HE sat quite still in his stall for several minutes after the curtain had fallen and the storm of applause had subsided.

Most men would have doubted the evidence of their senses and felt uncertain; but Foyle was quite assured that the "Olive Merton," who had made so tremendous a success, was none other than Nora Neil, of Marishannon; he had watched her keenly as she came before the curtain, had seen through the wig, and, more convincing and conclusive than all else, had detected a little trick of the eyebrows which he had noticed in Nora and no other woman.

He was amazed, but he showed no sign of his astonishment; and presently rose and sauntered out to the refreshment and smoking-saloon. He found that the excitement had, so to speak, flowed like a suddenly risen stream from the auditorium into it. At one end of the saloon stood a knot of critics, with whiskies and cigarettes, discussing the new actress; and the audience, as they stood at the bar or sat round the marble tables, were all on the same theme.

Amongst the critics lounged Mr. Jacob Levison—he was well known to journalists, of course—and Spencer Foyle strolled up, languidly took a liqueur and a cigarette, and listened. He wanted to get all the information he could without asking questions.



"Wonderful bit of acting!" said one of the critics. "Don't know that I've seen anything so natural and strong lately."

He was the dramatic hand of the *Thunderer*, and not a few of the smaller fry were in the habit of following in his lead.

"Extraordinary!" said a second.

"Yes; that's the word," nodded the *Thunderer* man.

"It is extraordinary, seeing that she has done nothing before—so far as we know—excepting Mary."

"So far as we know," remarked a third. "But I daresay it's true. She looks young; and once or twice there were signs of inexperience. Perhaps that is why she acted so naturally. The old stagey business is going to the wall; it has had its day, and, please Heaven, will soon cease to be. There wasn't a stagey attitude or accent in the whole scene; and the business of throwing out her arms to the church as she fell on the grave was simply magnificent in its realism."

"Then her face!" said a younger critic, with even a touch of enthusiasm. "It's the loveliest and the most expressive I've ever seen—"

"You have a lot to see still," remarked the *Thunderer*, sententiously. "But you're right; the girl's beautiful enough for anything."

"An uncommon type of beauty, too," said another man, thoughtfully. "There's a lot of reserve power about the mouth; of—of—well, strength and firmness unusual in a woman. She'll go far, this young woman will, mark my words."

"A great catch for Walford," remarked the *Thunderer*. (Walford was the manager.) "She'll make the piece, and fill the house right through the season. A great catch! I wonder where he got her? Does any one know?"

There was silence for a moment. Foyle leant against the bar with his eyes half-closed, sending the smoke delicately through his lips. One of the men shook his head.

"Don't know, and can't find out. Don't suppose there's much mystery about it. Expect he found her in the provinces, or picked her out of an amateur club."

"That's not likely," said the *Thunderer* man. "She'd be more stagey. No one is so stagey as your amateur."

"The girl's a lady, anyhow," said the younger man.

"What is a lady?" asked the *Thunderer*, sententiously, again, as he raised his whisky glass. "She may be a lady in refinement of face and voice, but I doubt whether she has moved in good society. There were one or two things—accent, and so on—which betrayed her."

"You're making a mystery of her," remarked a man, with a laugh. "That's the only thing wanted to fetch the public completely. Hint that she is a countess in disguise, or a *donna incognita*, and there you are, don't you know."

There was a general laugh of concurrence.

"And no one knows where she comes from?" asked the *Dramatic Mirror* man, as if unsatisfied. "Dash it—some one must know! I want to say something about her antecedents, her past, and all that."

"So do we all, my boy," said the *Thunderer*. "Hallo! here's Walford!" he broke off, as the manager entered the saloon, and looked round him with the managerial smile. He had reason to feel satisfied, for there was a prospect of a small fortune in the new drama—and the new actress.

He came close to Foyle, and asked for a cigarette, and the critics gradually drew round him.

"All going right, I hope?" he said, modestly, and with a nod here and there.

"We haven't seen the whole of the thing yet," said the *Thunderer*.

"Oh, the last act's all right; strong and firm, I think you'll find," said Walford.

"Anyhow, you've got a good thing in the young woman," said one of the critics, frankly.

Walford beamed, then checked himself, and looked as meek as he could.

"Glad to hear it!" he said. "The house seems pleased with her."

"'Pleased '!' echoed the young man. "Why, they went mad over her!"

The manager knew this as well as he did, but looked faintly surprised and pleased.

"Did they, indeed? I was down-stairs—"

"Oh, bosh! You know all about it, old man!" broke in the *Dramatic Mirror*. "Tell us something about her. We want to know, you know!"

Walford had been expecting and waiting for this. He was an astute manager, and knew how to work his public, critics included. He was silent a moment or two, then he got into the centre of the group, and, lowering his voice, said, with a beautiful affectation of reluctant candour:

"Well, I don't know that I ought to let out, but—"

"You old fraud, you're dying to tell us!" interpolated the *Thunderer*, genially.

Walford smiled.

"I was thinking of the young lady and her wishes," he said; "'pon my honour, I don't know whether I ought; but you'd find it out for yourselves presently, and I may as well save you some trouble. Miss Merton is the daughter of a clergyman—he's a rural dean, in fact—"

"What is a rural dean, anyhow?" asked the *Mirror* man, irreverently.

"—Who," continued Walford, "has the usual prejudice against the stage, and went so far as to actually forbid his daughter to think of going into the profession. But you know how it is with them when they have talent and are fairly gone? Miss Merton, under pretence of paying a visit, came up to London, made the acquaintance of Miss Moberley, and got her chance in *Mary*— And there's the whole story, gentleman!"

"And a very pretty story, too!" said the *Mirror* man, with the most open scepticism. "We've heard that story of the clergyman's daughter too often, old man. Try us with another."

Walford laughed.

"Fact, I assure you!" he said, without the least resentment at the reception of his fable. "I must run away now; the curtain will be up directly. Miss Yorke's very strong in this act, you'll find, I think. Ta-ta! See you after the show's over," and he hurried away.

"Walford's good at a fairy tale, isn't he?" said one of the men. "But I shall print it; and refer to him if there's any question."

"And then he'll say he didn't mean us to believe it. You can't score off Walford!"

There was a general laugh; the curtain-bell rang, and the critics and the rest of the audience flocked back to their seats.

Levison, who had been talking and drinking with some acquaintances, joined Foyle.

"Going back?" he asked, nodding towards the stall door.

"No, I think not," said Foyle, indifferently.

"Seems to 'ave had a successh?" said Levison. "Wot's this girl they're all ravin' about?" he asked, without any interest.

Foyle shrugged his shoulders as if he felt as little.

"Look here," said Levison, "we'll drop into the sthalls and see the last act, and then you come home with me, and we'll talk that matter over."

Foyle hesitated a moment, then nodded in assent, and they made their way into their seats.

The last act went, as the manager prophesied, strong and firm. There was great cheering, and calls for the actors, the author, and the manager. Sedley appeared and bowed, looking hard and gruff; and then some one called out, "Miss Merton!" "Lucy!" The cry was taken up and continued with the imperativeness of a London audience who will have its way, and presently the manager reappeared leading on Nora. She had been told that she would probably be called, and had been advised to keep on her stage dress; and at sight of her the crowded house broke out into loud and enthusiastic cheering. She looked very young and very pale, and the lovely eyes were raised for a moment to meet the blinding glare and the mist of faces, then, as if she were overpowered by the noise, they were lowered modestly, and they remained cast down until she had crossed the stage and was lost to view.

"She's a stunner!" said Levison, as he and Foyle made their way out. "That girl'sh got a fletcher before her!"

"I daresay," said Foyle.

As they reached the vestibule, he heard a voice say:

"How do you do, Mr. Foyle?" and, turning, saw Lord Esdaile. They had met once or twice at the Hall.

Lady Blanche was with her father, and she gave Foyle the half nod and smile of recognition.

The two men shook hands.

"Are you staying in London?" asked Foyle.

"Yes," said Lord Esdaile. "My daughter—I don't think you have met her."

"I have not had that pleasure—that is, in the orthodox fashion," said Foyle.

"Oh, yes, we have met!" said Blanche. "Mr. Foyle is the gentleman who so kindly held my horse, papa."

Lord Esdaile smiled in his grave way.

"Then we are indebted to you, Mr. Foyle, in quite an unorthodox way. Yes; we are staying here for a time. My daughter has lured me up to London for a short season of dissipation."

"You have begun well," said Foyle. He was anxious to know whether the Esdailes had recognised Nora.

"Have we not?" said Blanche. "It is a splendid play, isn't it? Oh, I do love the theatre!"

"Yes, it is a very good play; and it is very well acted, don't you think?" he added, with as much deference as if he were addressing a recognised critic.

"Oh, capitally!" she assented. "Especially by that Miss Merton. She made me cry; she did, indeed!"

Foyle looked at her keenly, then smiled: evidently they had not recognised Nora.

"I, too, must plead guilty to something that answers to tears with men," he said.

The man at the door called, "Lord Esdaile's carriage!" and they moved forward. As they did so, Blanche looked over her shoulder.

"We are staying at Clansdale Gardens, No. 19, and we shall be pleased to see you, if you can find time to call," she said.

The invitation ought, of course, to have come from her father; and he frowned slightly, but made haste to add:

"Yes; very pleased, Mr. Foyle!"

Foyle bowed.

"Thank you," he said; "I shall be very glad."

Mr. Levison stood a little apart, looking on enviously and admiringly.

"Reg'lar swells, ain't they, Mr. Foyle?" he said—his respect for Foyle going up considerably. "What was the gentleman's name?"

"They were Lord Esdaile and his daughter," said Foyle, carelessly. "What a beast of a crowd! And raining, too. After all, I don't think I'll come on with you this evening, Levison."

"Oh, yesh, you will!" said Levison, insistently. "We'll 'ave a cab, and be there in no time. There's a man there I want you to see."

He called a cab, and they were driven to the Cavendish Mansions, in which Mr. Levison rented a flat. Mr. Levison's rooms were, like himself, gorgeous and vulgar; his "drorin'-room," as he called it, was a mass of crimson plush, gilding, bevelled-edged glass, and staring ornaments, which almost literally blinded a stranger. The electric light shone through red globes, which threw a lurid light upon the barbaric splendour; there were execrable oil paintings—one cannot call them pictures—in the heaviest and most ornate of frames; artificial flowers, of the most hideously glaring kind, stood in marble vases upon ormolu tables; the carpet was of Axminster, and of the largest and most gaudy pattern; in a word, the apartment was in the vile taste of a vulgar, rich man; and, of course, Mr. Jacob Levison was inordinately proud of it.

"This is my little den, Foyle," he said, waving his fat, be-ringed hand, and looking round proudly. "No place like 'ome, be it ever so 'omely, eh? Sit down, and make yourself at 'ome." And he playfully and hospitably pushed Foyle

into a hideous saddle-bag chair, in which he sank as into a feather-bed. "And now, what's it to be? We'll 'ave a bottle of chamy. Don't say 'No,' for I fancy a glass or two myself, and want an excuse."

Foyle, knowing very well that it would be useless to say "No," refrained from refusal; and Mr. Levison got a bottle from the gilt sideboard, and rang for glasses.

A young Jew, in a kind of livery, answered the bell, and placed the wine and glasses on the table, scanning Foyle with curiosity from the corners of his almond eyes. The room had a peculiar smell in it, as of stale cigars and spilt wine, and Foyle hastened to light a cigarette in self-defence. Not that he was squeamish, for Mr. Spencer Foyle had been in stranger places than Mr. Jacob Levison's drorin'-room, and amongst stranger people than its owner.

"I 'ope you've been thinkin' over my little proposal, Foyle," said Levison, as he sank into a saddle-bag opposite his guest's.

Foyle smiled to himself, as he thought how surprised Mr. Levison would be if he could know how very differently his, Foyle's, thoughts had been occupied.

"It's a good thing, a deuced good thing; and it may turn out a splendid affair. 'Oo knows? And it isn't a heavy amount of work I'm askin' you. It'sh just to run out there, see the place, get the reportsh, and work the thing generally." He paused a moment. "I 'ope you haven't took offence about what I said respectin' the Bonanza—"

Foyle smiled rather absently. He found it difficult to distract his thoughts from the strange discovery, the still stranger fact, that "Olive Merton" was Nora Neil.

"Oh, no," he said, quite pleasantly. "I didn't attach any importance to it. In the first place, I am not frightened by any inquiry into the business, or, indeed, into any affair in which I am connected. I am too careful."

Levison nodded.

"You leave the ship before she springs a leak? Yes, that's my way; it's always the best—always. You may get a bit extra for holdin' on; but what I saysh ish—be prudent, be careful, and get out o' the thing well—*well*, mind!—before the smash."

"And I knew that there would be no inquiry which would affect me, or, of course, you wouldn't be so foolish as to employ me as your agent in this new matter."

He said it quite pleasantly, and by no means as if he were proud of his astuteness; and Levison laughed.

"You're sharp, Mr. Foyle—sharp! Well, I don't like you none the less. I'd rather 'ave to do business with a kna—with a clever man than a fool."

"I feel honoured," said Foyle.

"But, touching this business. Of course, I don't expect you to go out alone; and I've got a man who's ready to go with you, and—and—"

"Do the dirty work?" put in Foyle, languidly.

Levison nodded.

"Yes, that'sh just it. What a capital fellow you are for the right word, Mr. Foyle! And he's a man as won't shtick at much." He lowered his voice. "I've employed him once or twice before, and always found him—shatisfactory."

Foyle nodded. Though he might not think fit to accept Levison's offer, it was as well to know all about it.

"You can rely on him. He ain't squeamish, and if it comes to a push, why, he ain't got any ridiculous scruples."

"A desperado?" said Foyle, coolly. "He would be useful, I daresay. Who is he? Do I know him?"

Levison lowered his voice again.

"Hish name'sh Tusker. He's been unfortunate, pore fellow. I don't know whether you remember that Belgian bank business, where the bank messenger was robbed of the bul-lion he was bringin' over?"

Foyle thought for a moment. "I think I do. He was chloroformed and gagged in his cabin, and robbed."

"That'sh it," said Levison, leaning back easefully and sipping his champagne. "The pore young man was so knocked about that they thought he'd kick the bucket. Which would 'ave been a bad business for Tusker, for he'd 'ave got the long drop instead of seven years. Of course he was innocent. He only happened to be carryin' the bag down the gangway—he'd mistook it for his own, which, strange to say, was exactly similar."

Foyle nodded languidly.

"Singular coincidence," he said; "unfortunate mistake."

"Wasn't it?" said Mr. Levison, without moving a muscle.

"Well, Tusker got seven years, and, when he came out, I happened to meet 'im, an', takin' pity on 'im, I give 'im some work now and agen."

"What sort of work?" inquired Foyle, but very indifferently.

Mr. Levison hesitated for the space of a moment or two.

"Oh, all kinds. He's very useful in findin' out thingah as you want to know—"

"A sort of spy?" said Foyle.

"Well, you can call 'im what you like," responded Mr. Levison, with engaging candour. "But he's up to more than that. He's a man you can depend upon, equally in a quiet job or in a rough or tumble. Hush! I can hear 'im coming up the stairs. Of course mum's the word about the bank business!"

Foyle smiled.

"I never allude to unpleasant incidents in a man's career," he said.

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## CHAPTER XXVI.

THE Jew boy ushered in the visitor. He was a short little man, with small black eyes and a big moustache. Foyle saw at a glance that, though the man was small, he was well made, and sinewy and tightly strung. He was carefully and quietly dressed—in marked contrast to the shiny splendour of his patron and employer—and had rather a gentlemanly appearance and manner. He shot a sharp glance at Foyle, but only a glance, and shook hands with Mr. Levison with marked composure and self-possession.

"This is Mr. Tusker, Mr. Foyle," Levison said. "I was goin' to tell you that he was comin', when I 'eard his step on the stairs. This is Mr. Foyle, Tusker—a gentleman as I want you to know."

Tusker, with a longer glance at Foyle's impassive face, bowed, and took a seat.

"Fill your glassh, and passh the bottle," exhorted Mr. Levison, genially. "Not a bad vintage, eh, Tusker? Genuine 1884. Mr. Foyle, fill up, and we'll get to business at once. I've been telling Mr. Foyle about our little spec, Tusker, and I'm 'oping that I shall persuade 'im to join us. If he doesh, I tell 'im 'e'll 'ave a man, in you, who knows the ropesh over there, and who'll go through with the business like a practical man."

Tusker nodded, and eyed Foyle covertly, as Levison went into details of the scheme which he had sketched in the saloon at the Duke's.

"Of course," he wound up, "you may find that the gold's there! In fact, nothingsh more likely. There'ah gold all over Australia, ain't there, Tusker?"

Mr. Tusker nodded.

"Yes," he said, "nearly all over. But that doesn't signify," Mr. Levison coughed. "What you want is the report,



and a description of the place. And it may be necessary to do a little work on it, to sink a shaft—”

“Oh, you only want to dig a hole!” put in Mr. Levison, expostulatingly. “You don’t want to run to any expense.”

Tusker shook his head rather dissentingly.

“That used to do in the old times,” he said. “But the public like to have a show for their money. Send ’em over a photograph of a kind of shaft, with heaps of stones and muck, and half a dozen men in their shirt-sleeves standing on ’em, and they’re ready to believe in the thing and take shares.”

Mr. Levison nodded with generous self-abnegation.

“Just as you like!” he said. “It shan’t be said that I spoilt the thing for the sake of a pound or two.”

“And Mr. Foyle and I are going alone?” said Tusker, interrogatively.

Levison nodded.

“Two’s enough, ain’t it?”

Tusker looked doubtful.

“Three’s better,” he said, reflectively.

Foyle smiled, as if he understood, and Tusker smiled in response.

“Just so, Mr. Foyle. If one plays false, the other fellow’s got a man to help him. Besides, if there’s only two, and one gets sick or put out of the way, the other fellow is left all alone.”

“I see,” said Foyle, “and you have a third man to propose, Mr. Tusker?”

Tusker was not at all offended by this straight shot.

“Well, I have,” he said, “or I *had*, but I can’t find him.”

“Who is it?” asked Levison. “Any one I know?”

Tusker did not colour, but he looked down in a strange way, and cleared his throat.

“It was the man who was with me in the Bank business,” he said, coolly.

“What business was that?” asked Foyle, innocently.

“Never mind; I’ll tell you some other time—or Mr. Tusker will,” said Levison, “it’s of no consequence. What’s the man’s name, Tusker?”

“Fawcett,” said Tusker.

“Ah, yes, I remember,” said Mr. Levison, softly. “A very decent fellow. He—er—left the country same time as you did, didn’t he?”

“He did,” said Tusker, quite unabashed. “But he came back, and I’ve seen him since once or twice. He’d be just the man for us. He’s cool, and to be depended on, and I’ve

a notion that he's been in the country before—I mean, Australia."

"If so, he'd be very useful," said Levison. "Sure you can't find 'im?"

Tusker reflected.

"I don't know; I might try. I saw him in London the last time; but only for a minute or two; in fact, he fought rather shy of me."

It was evident that there was no false pride about Mr. Tusker.

"I fancy he'd got into something and was settling down; for, as it happened, I had a little thing in hand, and I offered him a share in it, but he didn't catch on; in fact, as I say, he fought shy."

"Ah! reformed character," said Mr. Levison, with a grin. "Most likely got a job of 'is own in 'and, and too busy, eh, Tusker?"

"Probably," said Tusker, absently. He seemed to be thinking, for, after a pause, he said: "I've half an idea I could put my hand upon him. He was rather a strange fish; one of those fellows who hark back upon the past, don't you know, Mr. Levison."

Levison nodded. Foyle was scarcely listening. He lit a fresh cigarette and leant back, and half closed his eyes.

"What makes you think you can put your 'and on 'im?" asked Levison. "Open another bottle, will you, Tusker? You'll find it in the usual place, an' there'sh more in the cellar below."

"Well, Fawsett was a married man," said Tusker, as he opened the champagne. "He'd married a girl in the country. A nicish sort of woman by his account; but too straight-laced, I expect. Anyhow, they didn't get on, and he cut and run. Marriage is a mistake, I think."

"You're right, my boy, you're right!" assented Mr. Levison, unctuously. "Never give a woman the right to 'alf your makings; for that'sh what it amounts to, eh, Tusker?"

Mr. Tusker nodded. "Fawsett left her soon after they were married; in fact, he didn't know that she had got a child until he came out of pris—until he came back to England."

He made the correction quite coolly, and was not at all discomposed by the slip.

"It's my idea he'd a-nankering to go back to her. Perhaps he wanted to see the kid—kind of paternal feeling, don't you know. Can't say I understand it myself—but some fellows feel that way."

Mr. Levison nodded.

"Very likely he had," he remarked. "Some men are such fools, aren't they? What's the name of the place, Tusker? You might run down and see."

"It's rather a long run," said Tusker. "It's in Ireland. She was an Irish girl. I can't think of the name of the place for a moment."

"There's a map of Ireland in the next room," suggested Levison.

Tusker shook his head, and pondered for awhile as he sipped his wine; then he looked up:

"I've got it—or part of it. It's Mari—Mari—something or other—ah, yes—Marishannon!"

Foyle sat up suddenly; then, under the pretence that he wanted his glass, reached for it, and drank slowly.

"A curious name," he said, languidly, and with a smothered yawn. "Where is it?"

"I think—I'm not sure—that it's in Kerry," said Tusker. "I can soon find out. Of course, the woman may have left the place long ago—very likely has; but, when Fawsett talked about her to me, she was living there. A wild, outlandish place, with a big lake, he used to describe it. I used to fancy he'd been there on the sly, and without letting her know."

Levison nodded.

"And what's her name?" he asked, as if it were quite a matter of course that Fawsett should be an *alias*.

Foyle flung his cigarette into the fireplace, to the imminent risk of the cheap and gaudy ornament, and, selecting another from his case, lit it, with his back to the other men.

Tusker thought for a moment. "I ought to remember," he said. "For I'm rather good at names."

"Yesh, it's useful—useful!" commented Mr. Levison. "Never forgot a name myself."

"It's in one syllable, and begins with N," mused Tusker. "North—Nash?"

"Nobs?" suggested Mr. Levison, pleasantly

"No—Neill! Yes, Neil's the name."

The cigarette fell from Foyle's hand, and he kicked it into the grate as he turned to Levison.

"These cigarettes of yours are infernally bad, Levison," he said—"I beg your pardon for interrupting, Mr. Tusker!—Have you any others?"

"Bad! Well, I never 'eard that shaid of 'em before. And I give no end of a price, too! But there'sh some othersh somewhere! There, in that box. 'Elp yourself."

Foyle got a fresh one, and lit it with his face turned towards them. He looked too listless and bored for words.

"If I could get Fawcett I'd answer for the proper working of the thing—with all deference to Mr. Foyle," said Tusker.

"Very well," said Levison. "Take a run over to this Mari—whatever it is, and try and find 'im. Not going, Foyle?" For Foyle had reached for his hat.

Foyle nodded, and shook hands with both men.

"You'll think it over, Foyle?" asked Levison, in a thick whisper, as he followed him outside the door.

"Yes," said Foyle, with the most pronounced drawl, "I'll think it over."

Foyle walked home to his rooms in Pont Street, his lips curved with a peculiar smile, his eyes gleaming now and again with an expression of sardonic satisfaction and anticipation.

The beautiful young girl, who had just taken the world by storm; who would, to a certain extent, be famous by to-morrow morning, when the newspapers were laid on the breakfast-tables; who was just launching on a career of success and triumph, was the daughter of an ex-convict!

He smiled as he thought how wonderfully accident—or Fate—was assisting him. If he had not dined with Levison, if he had definitely refused to join in this Australian venture, if he had declined even to go home with him, he would not have met the man Tusker, and heard the story of Nora's parentage!

"The daughter of a convict!" he said to himself, as he opened the street-door with his latch-key, and went up in his noiseless way to the artistic room which seemed more than usually refined and delightful, after Levison's garish "drorin'-room." "In a few weeks—months, she will be at the top of the hill—with wealth at her command! With friends, admirers, toadies, all round her. With something more than—for the girl is a lady—Heaven knows why and how!—and Society, with a capital 'S,' will receive her and pet her. And, all the time, she will be the daughter of an ex-convict. And I know her secret!"

He laughed softly as he exchanged his dress-coat for a smoking-jacket of purple velvet, and lit the everlasting cigarette.

The man loved power—power over men, but, better still, power over women. And he had this girl—whose beauty men were already raving about at the clubs, whose talent, genius, the newspapers would gush over in the morning—in his power.

"I must go slowly and cautiously," he murmured, with his eyes half-closed, his long white hands caressing his mouse

tache. "I must watch and wait. It won't do to frighten her, to let her suspect that I know—what she does not know herself, I'll be sworn! How beautiful she is!" He laughed, and his eyes gleamed. "To-night, as I sat and watched her, I had half made up my mind to marry her. There will be no need for that now, my dear, I think. Yes, I shall have her at my feet, with all her fame, and her money; just my slave! But I must be cautious."

He leant back and closed his eyes, a soft smile on his lips, as if he were enjoying the mental vision his murmured words called up.

Meanwhile, Nora had held a kind of levée behind the scenes. There are times when the chorus of congratulation is absolutely unanimous; and everybody about the Duke's that night was eager to swell the paean of praise which the audience in front had sent up. The actors stood together in the green-room, the supers stood at the wings, in little groups, and watched her eagerly—and, poor things! enviously—even the orchestra lingered in its den under the stage and discussed her.

Mr. Sedley was, of course, the foremost. He did not gush over her, but he took her hand and shook it up and down, and nodded at her with a rough kind of smile.

"First-rate!" he said. "I told you so, didn't I? But didn't think you were going to knock them quite so hard. I'm very much obliged to you, my dear!"

Miss Yorke, who was too good a woman and too conscientious an actress to be capable of jealousy, took her out of Mr. Sedley's hand and kissed her.

"I congratulate you, my dear, with all my heart! What a success—and no wonder! Where did you learn that business over the grave?" And she looked at her with a half-puzzled smile.

Nora smiled back.

"I must have learnt it from you," she said, "as I have learnt so much else!"

Miss Yorke turned to Mr. Sedley with a gesture.

"There! Isn't that like her? Did you ever know any girl so modest?"

"Never in my life!" responded Sedley, devoutly.

Mr. Johnson came up.

"Can you see Mr. Walford for a few minutes before you go, Miss Merton?" he asked. And there was a new note in his voice, and a novel respect in his usually abrupt manners; for the genuine stage-manager is seldom polite, and a no-respecter of persons.

Miss Yorke smiled significantly.

"I hope he will offer you a big, a very big salary, dear" she whispered.

Mr. Walford came down the corridor with a cheerful countenance, but a cautious mind. He had got to secure this young lady at any price; and, like most men who have to do with arts and letters, he was really generous and liberal-minded.

"Will you come into my room, Miss Merton?" he said, holding the door open for her. And in a few words, after congratulating her on her success, he made her an offer of a long engagement, and at a salary which made Nora open her eyes and catch her breath for a moment.

"You are sure you are quite satisfied?" he said, in his most charming manner. "If not, please do not hesitate to say so. I like all my people to feel satisfied and happy while they are at the Duke's."

Nora assured him that she was quite satisfied. And at last she managed to get away from the various groups of friends—friends spring up like mushrooms under the sun of sudden prosperity!—and start for home. The stage-door-keeper called a cab for her: he had never done so before!

A friend of Dora's had been at the Duke's that night, and had dashed round to the Empress to tell her of Miss Merton's marvellous success; so that Dora, with open arms and exultant heart, was waiting to receive Nora.

"Oh! my dear, my dear!" she said, with a suspicious shimmer in her eyes, in which laughter alone usually shone; "I can't tell you how glad, how pleased, how *proud* I am! But I knew it—I knew it! 'I kind o' felt it,' as they say. What a swell you'll be! Oh! this won't be good enough for you now!" She looked round the small and plainly furnished room.

Nora shook her head.

"Oh, but it won't! You mustn't stop here!" said Dora, seriously. "You don't know what a personage you have become, or what hosts of swell friends will come round you! You'll be interviewed and photographed, and people will call with cards, in the hope of getting you to their parties! I know the whole business, for I've heard Miss Temple brag about it!"

"Then my swell friends will have to be content with this," said Nora.

But in the morning Dora succeeded in persuading her to look out for better rooms, and in a few days they moved

into them. And, as Dora had said, the interviewer and the photographer soon bore down upon Miss Merton. But Nora, much to Dora's amazement and disappointment, would neither be photographed nor interviewed. She did not seem to crave for that kind of fame or notoriety—did not appear at all anxious to launch out into new clothes and jewellery—and, to Dora's increased amazement, was evidently wrapped up in her work.

And what work it was! Every night the Duke's was crammed, and the audience nightly grew frantic with enthusiasm over the dying scene.

She played it better as she went on—that goes without saying—and even Mr. Johnson admitted, though grudgingly, that he had at last been favoured with a sight of a genius.

And every night Nora peered timidly across the footlights, hoping, half dreading, to see the beloved face amongst the mass; and every night she turned away with a heavy throb through her heart, as she failed to find that face.

But one night, as she looked along the rows of the stalls, she saw a face which made her start; a thin, handsome face, with eyes which were regarding her with a rapt look.

It was Mr. Spencer Foyle.

She had almost forgotten him, and she forgot him again in the absorption of her part; and she started again, therefore, when, just as she was getting into her cab, after the performance, he stepped forward from out of the shadow of the stage-door, and murmured her name. She felt that she ought to be glad to see him; at any rate, that there was not the least reason for nervousness or fear, and yet, as she said, calmly enough, "How do you do, Mr. Foyle?" and met his pleasant, smiling gaze, something, like a chill breath, seemed to pass over her heart.

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## CHAPTER XXVII.

SPENCER FOYLE stood before Nora, all respect and deference; she might have been a queen, and he a subject craving audience. "My first word must be one asking your forgiveness for stopping you at such an hour and place, Miss Nei—Miss Merton," he said.

"I am very glad to see you, Mr. Foyle," said Nora. But though she spoke warmly enough, there was not much gladness in her voice.

"I would have ventured to call upon you in the proper way," he went on, "but I did not know your address, and I

have not presumed to ask it of the theatre people; indeed, they would not have given it to me."

Nora looked straight in front of her. Such a number of persons, most of them of much more importance than Mr. Spencer Foyle, wished to call upon her, and she had declined the honour. She would have liked to refuse him the permission; but it occurred to her that to do this would exhibit a certain amount of ingratitude. But for him she would never have come to London; but for him she would not be Miss Merton, the successful actress, but still Nora Neil of the Lake Cottage, a peasant girl of Marishannon. So she said, but with a little reluctance:

"I live very quietly, and have few visitors, Mr. Foyle."

"Will you not make an exception in my favour?" he asked, humbly.

She inclined her head.

"I live at 28 Feltham Street," she said; "and I am generally at home at four o'clock."

"Thank you," he said, very gratefully. "I will avail myself of your kind permission, and call. I have so much to tell you of—Marishannon."

He lowered his voice, and then looked round, as if afraid of being overheard, and Nora coloured slightly.

"Then come, please," she said.

He bowed, and put her into the vehicle, and stood bare-headed as she was driven off.

"Quite the grand lady—already!" he murmured, with a smile. "She is an extraordinary girl! Only a few weeks—months—ago, and she was running about an Irish village, and—now! But it was in her. I remember how she repulsed that fool, Warner; how she used to stand beside me, gazing before her at the lake as if I did not exist, or were just one of the stones under her feet. But all the better for my purpose. You may queen it still higher, my dear, if you like. The higher you stand the less you will care to fall!"

Nora went home vaguely troubled. She had no other reason to distrust Mr. Foyle than the indefinite, intangible feeling with which he had always inspired her.

What harm could he do her? Why should he betray her to the people of Marishannon?

She tried to overcome her uneasiness as she was driven home, and, on arriving, at once told Dora that she had met an old friend—she paused before the word "friend"—and that he was intending to call.

"Really? Well, I'm glad you've broken the ice, dear,"



said Dora, who was much disappointed at the persistence with which Nora "kept to herself." "Is he nice? And when's he coming?"

Nora smiled.

"Yes, I suppose he is nice," she said; "and I think he will be very likely to call to-morrow—so you must be at home, Dora, about four o'clock."

Dora opened her eyes. "Oh! do you really want me?"

"I really and certainly want you," said Nora.

A little after four, the neat servant brought up Mr. Foyle's card, and Foyle, following at her heels, was ushered into the modest little drawing-room.

The way in which it was furnished, and its air of "home" surprised him; he had expected to find it gaudy and garish; but, of course, there was no sign of such surprise in his face as Nora rose from a low chair to greet him. Dora was seated behind the regulation tea-table, and Nora introduced her.

"This is my friend, Miss Moberley," she said, in her quiet, calm way. "We live together, as you see. Will you not sit down?"

He bowed to Dora, sat down, and began to talk, as a Spencer Foyle can talk. He was perfectly at his ease, and had a beautiful touch of respect in his voice—a gentle deference—which charmed Dora at once. He spoke of the play, and Nora's acting, with infinite tact, and a feeling of genuine admiration, avoiding the foolish flattery which most men would have indulged in, for he knew Nora well enough to be aware that it would only offend and disgust her. Then a word or two of praise for Dora's performance in "Cupid Caught," and he led her on to talk on different matters.

In fact, he almost made it appear that his visit was to her; and Nora, leaning back in her chair and listening, was already sufficiently a woman of the world to appreciate his skill.

The neat maid brought in the tea, and he waited on the two girls with the air with which he would have ministered to a couple of duchesses. In short, he was so charming that Dora quite forgot he was Nora's friend, not hers, and, remembering suddenly, rose.

"I am going to get a photograph of mine to show you, Mr. Foyle," she said. "I should like to show you one of Miss Merton's, but she positively refuses to be taken. Absurd, isn't it?"

Foyle smiled; but he glanced at Nora as if he understood and appreciated her modesty. Then, as she door closed, he leant forward in his chair.

"Now that we are alone, let me tell you, as quickly as I can, about Marishannon," he said, in a low voice. "Of course, I was there when they discovered that you had—fled. Lord Larry and I went down to the cottage, and saw Mrs. Neil."

Nora went rather pale.

"She—my mother?" was all she could say.

"Was much distressed, of course," he made haste to continue. "But she was very calm and quiet. I think she felt that you would come to no harm."

"What harm could I come to?" asked Nora, frankly.

He inclined his head.

"Just so. But London is full of dangers for the inexperienced."

"I know. I had my pocket picked before I had been in it many hours," she said, with a faint smile, "and I lost the address you gave me."

"You relieve me!" he said. "I—I thought perhaps it was because you mistrusted me."

"Why should I?" she asked, with surprise. "But my mother—tell me, please!"

"We comforted her as well as we could, and I offered to come up, and endeavour to find you."

She knit her brows.

"You could have told them where I had gone—where you thought I had gone?" she said.

He smiled.

"I could. But do you think I should betray you, Miss Neil—I beg your pardon!—Miss Merton? I will not forget again."

Nora inclined her head. "And you looked for me?"

"Yes, everywhere!" he said. "And I found you on the first night of the new play." She looked at him with some surprise. "You are wondering why I did not try to speak to you, see you, before this?"

"Yes," said Nora, with her usual directness.

"Well," he said, "I wished to do so, but I did not like to presume upon our slight acquaintance. I felt that you would rather not be recognised, sought out, and I stifled my inclination and desire. If—may I speak plainly?—if I had found you in less flourishing circumstances, I would have ventured to seek an interview with you; but you were most prosperous, and there was no need for me to intrude myself."

Nora thought this was wonderful delicacy on his part, and looked her thanks.

"I knew that Mrs. Neil was no longer anxious about you."

He paused, and Nora said, in a low voice:

"No. I—I have written to my mother. She does not know where I am in London, or what I am doing. Perhaps you will blame me for this concealment."

"Indeed I do not!" he said, with an inward feeling of relief and satisfaction. "I think you have acted very wisely in keeping the people at Marishannon in ignorance of your address and your doings. It is quite possible that Mrs. Neil would not approve of the stage—the persons who know least about it are generally those who are most ready to condemn it—and, in any case, it is better for one who has achieved so great a success, but who has still a long fight before her, to—er—stand alone."

"Yes," she said, almost to herself. "I have been very lucky—"

"Lucky!" he murmured. "It was not luck, but real merit for once receiving its due meed."

"It is very kind of you to say so," said Nora. "But I think, and know, that I have been extraordinarily lucky. You do not know how accident favoured me; how kind everybody has been, how ready to help and encourage." She turned her head away; and he knew that tears had sprung to her eyes. But the next moment they were dry, and splendidly calm, as he remembered them of old. "But you are right when you said that I had still a long fight before me, Mr. Foyle. I may fail next time, you know," and she smiled.

He shook his head.

"There will be no such word in your dictionary as fail," he said, very quietly and earnestly. "You possess genius—"

Nora laughed, and shook her head.

"—And you will do greater things even than you are doing now! And how great they are is proved by the tears which you make us shed each night."

There is not an artist living who is insensible to praise—especially when it appears genuine and spontaneous. Nora flushed slightly, though she shook her head again.

"You are far up the steps of the mount which leads to the Temple of Fame," he went on, "and if I venture to hug the delusion that, in some slight extent, I advised you to hazard the ascent, you will not deem me presumptuous?"

"No, indeed not!" said Nora. "I should not have come to London if you had not told me of all its possibilities and delights. But—but, did you not exaggerate a little Mr.

Foyle? I do not think it is a city paved with gold, or that one is so certain to succeed. I remember"—she shuddered—"how I walked along the cold, pitiless streets. Oh! no, it is not certain success; rather, I would feel inclined to place over every road that leads to London, 'Abandon Hope nearly all ye who enter there!'"

"Ah! but you lost the address I gave you," he said, quietly. "If you had gone there, I should have been so bold as to have followed you and humbly offered my advice."

"Yes, I know," she said; "I did not think of it then; but I know now that you would have done so. You meant very kindly, Mr. Foyle."

"And—forgive me if I say—I mean as kindly now," he said, with a smile, but with an added respect in his tone and manner. "I know that sounds presumptuous and superfluous, for are you not already so successful and famous as to need neither advice nor assistance?"

"No," said Nora, quietly. "Please say what you were going to say."

He seemed to hesitate for a moment, then he said:

"Miss Merton, I know the world—alas! I know it too well!—and I know, what you will discover all too soon, that merit is not enough to win permanent success and prosperity. It is a world of self-interest and self-seeking. It is hopeless for any one, no matter how clever, to think of keeping a position without—what shall I say?—a certain amount of management, tact, knowledge of the world. I spoke of cleverness, but genius is still more greatly in need of these qualities than mere talent."

Nora listened attentively—she partly understood him.

"Now, you are a genius," he said, "and that's a great stumbling-block to success, for genius always disregards—treats with contempt—all the precautions for, and aids to, self-advancement which are absolutely necessary."

Nora laughed for the first time.

"What is it you are advising me to do?" she asked.

"To make your present success a stepping-stone to greater ones," he said, promptly. "You think that it is only necessary to play your part—and how splendidly you play it!—to ensure continued success."

"Why, what else can I do?" said Nora, with surprise.

"Make your position secure by entrenchment," he said. "For instance—forgive me—but you are wrong to live in seclusion as you are doing. Why should you hide yourself from everybody?"

"There is a reason why I should hide," said Nora, in a low voice.

"Because some one would recognise you? But is that likely? Who is likely to come from Marishannon? One moment! You were going to say the Esdailes."

"I was," said Nora.

"Well, they are here in London."

She changed colour.

"I met Lord Esdaile and Lady Blanche coming from the Duke's the other night. They were enthusiastic over 'Miss Merton'; they had no suspicion that they had been applauding an old acquaintance—a neighbour."

"You recognised me!" said Nora.

He dropped his eyes, and was silent a moment.

"That is true," he said. "But—no, I will not say it"—he hesitated, as if repressing himself. "Let us say that my eyes were phenomenally sharp; and, remember, I was searching for you. And if they recognise you—what then?"

She gazed before her thoughtfully.

"They cannot seize upon you, and carry you back to Marishannon. But they would never detect you on the stage, and are not likely to do so in society. They probably only go out to a few friends—quiet country-folk like themselves, and are certain not to go to the houses to which I see you have been invited."

He looked at the silver filigree basket, in which Dora had, with unspeakable pride, arranged the cards and invitations of the great people who were dying to make Miss Merton's acquaintance. Nora coloured.

"And you wish—you advise me—to go out—to accept—"

"Yes, I do," he said, with a gentle kind of eagerness.

"These people want you to play the lioness in their drawing-rooms." For the first time the cynical smile distorted his lips. "Well, go and roar! You please them, but reap the benefit and profit!"

"I," said Nora, with her brows drawn straight—"I—I do not want to know them—to go to their parties. What have I—an actress, a woman who earns her living by making audiences cry or laugh, by amusing the people—to do with these?" And she touched, rather contemptuously and impatiently, the heap of cards and scented notes.

"You want to know them, to go to their houses, because by doing so you will become the fashion," he said, quietly and impressively. "No actor ever holds his own nowadays unless he is the pampered idol of the drawing-rooms."

Nora frowned thoughtfully, and he watched her closely. Would he find her too strong for him? Would she detect the falseness of his reasoning?

"Besides," he went on, in a lower and more hesitating voice, "if I know you—I mean, if I understand you—you have higher aspirations than those which usually bound the sphere of an actress. You will not be satisfied with remaining just 'Miss Merton, of the Duke's.' You will want to take your place in the great world outside the theatre, to rise in the social scale."

The colour mounted to her face, and a light gleamed softly in her eyes. To rise, to get nearer to Denis's level! Foyle saw that he had struck the right note, and was wise enough to add only a few words.

"You can easily do that. Society is ready to welcome such a one as you, Miss Merton; and I venture to prophesy that before long you will have joined what we used to call the Upper Ten, and, not only join it, but be of it—which is a very different thing."

Nora rose, and went to the window. Her heart was beating fast with the thoughts his words had so subtly suggested. Was it true? Should she be really "a lady"—one whom Denis would not be ashamed to marry?

Foyle rose, and glanced at his watch.

"I have inflicted a long visitation on you," he said. "I must not presume, or you will not permit me to come again."

"Is—is there no other news from Marishannon you can tell me?" asked Nora, as she gave him her hand. She longed to ask after the Earl, and—and if there were any tidings of Denis.

"Let me see," he said, thoughtfully. "No, I think not. I left Lord Dennison in his usual robust health. Oh, by-the-way, there has been no news of his nephew, Mr. Denis. He seems to have completely disappeared. I have been expecting to run against him in London—but I have not done so."

"You think he is in London?" said Nora; and, being an actress, she put the question with apparent ease and indifference.

"Oh, I imagine so. Men—and women, too"—and he smiled—"always come to the Little Village, you know. All roads lead to London! Good-bye! You will think over what I have, perhaps, been so bold to suggest."

"Yes, I will think it over. And, thank you!" said Nora.

She stood in the centre of the room for some minutes after he had gone. If Denis was in London, why had neither she

nor Mr. Foyle seen him? Where was he, and what was he doing?

The door opened softly, and Dora put her head round.

"Has he gone? I thought I heard the door close. What a delightful man, dear!"

Nora smiled as she took up a book.

"You like him, Dora?"

"Oh! I think he is charming! He is—well, almost handsome! And such beautiful manners! Don't *you* like him?" she added, eyeing Nora rather keenly. "You spoke as if—as if you didn't."

Nora coloured slightly, and her brows went straight.

"I—I don't know," she said, reluctantly. "I can never be quite sure. There is something—"

"I know what you mean, I think," said Dora. "There's something—odd in his smile, isn't there? You can't always be sure whether he is serious, or that he isn't making fun of you—not exactly laughing at you, but calling you a fool in his mind. I should say he was awfully clever. And I tell you what, dear, I'd rather have Mr. Foyle for a friend than an enemy!" And she shut her lips tight, and nodded emphatically.

Nora laughed.

"That sounds like a line from a play," she said. "Anyway, Mr. Foyle acts like a friend. He has been advising me to make the acquaintance of some of these grand people, and accept their invitations."

Dora clapped her hands.

"Bravo, Mr. Foyle!" she exclaimed. "He's sensible, at any rate! And you will, won't you, dear? What's the use of being famous if you don't take advantage of it?" She ran to the card-basket and turned over its contents. "Look here; here's Lady Marchmont's note! Now, she's simply dying to have you at her party. She wants to 'take you up,' you know. She's always taking up some celebrity or other—"

"And dropping them again, I suppose," said Nora, with a smile.

"What's it matter? They get their 'send-off.' They're launched, and can sail ahead without Lady Marchmont's help, once they're started. Oh! write and accept, dear! Do—just to please me?"

"I'll see," said Nora. But that night she wrote and accepted the invitation.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

LADY MARCHMONT was one of those great ladies who take an interest in famous persons. She was not merely a "new" woman, nor was she altogether a "lion" hunter; she belonged to that rapidly increasing class of fortunate people who are alive to the advantage of having interesting persons round them. Her receptions were always crowded; her dinner-parties always functions to be eagerly seized upon rather than avoided. One was certain to meet high and clever people at her house. The last minor poet, the famous actor, painter, singer, was sure to be on show at Lady Marchmont's. And she managed them with such skill and tact that, instead of being silent and sulky—as they are too apt to be at most parties—they were agreeable, and in the best of tempers.

Poets, who would rather have died than recite at most houses, recited for Lady Marchmont; painters would bring their sketches; the latest tenor would warble; and the great actor would unbend, and talk quite like an ordinary being, which was very gracious and condescending, seeing that he was simply worshipped by Lady Marchmont's smart and advanced set.

Nora went to the reception from the theatre. Now, she had never been to a party in her life, and knew nothing of fashionable ways and customs beyond what she had learnt at the theatre; and even the matter of her dress worried her a little. But her instinctive taste inspired her to choose one of black lace, which she bought and made up herself. For ornament she wore one white flower in her hair, and resisted all Dora's attempts at persuading her into buying jewellery. And Dora, who had run round to the dressing-room to see her before she started, admitted that Nora was right.

"You look—well, I don't know how to put it!—like a young duchess—a very young one!" she said, almost under her breath. "My dear, there won't be a lovelier girl in the room."

"Or a more foolish, if I were silly enough to believe you!" said Nora, as she bent forward and kissed her.

"And you're not nervous?" asked Dora; "at least, you don't look it. You look as calm and cool as a Neapolitan ice! And—and yet it's your first appearance in this character? Oh! don't tell me—I know better!" and she tossed her head.

"Indeed it is," said Nora, as she put her cloak over her



shoulders. "I have never been anywhere, nor seen any one, and I am a little nervous, though I may pretend I'm not. You see, I don't know the part"—she laughed—"and I shall make all sorts of mistakes, I daresay."

"Oh, no, you won't—you couldn't," retorted Dora. "Well, good-bye, dear! I shall keep awake to hear all about it! Perhaps Mr. Foyle will be there!"

When Nora alighted at Lady Marchmont's House, in Kensington Palace Gardens, she found the usual awning stretched from the hall down to the curb, the usual line of carriages, and the usual small crowd which had congregated to catch a glimpse of the great and famous people; and, much to her surprise and a little to her embarrassment, she found herself recognised.

"That's Miss Merton," exclaimed a woman, nudging her young man; and Nora heard her name pass from one to the other.

She heard it presently in more sonorous fashion, as the footman announced it at the door of the drawing-room, and her heart sank for a moment. Accustomed as she was to the glare of a theatre, the brilliance of the magnificent room, crowded with handsomely-dressed women, had its due effect upon her. But as heads turned towards her, and she felt a hundred eyes scanning her with polite but eager curiosity, a dapper little lady, looking absurdly young for her age, held out her hand:

"How do you do, Miss Merton?" said Lady Marchmont. "How very—*very* good of you to come! Edward, this is Miss Merton, whom you so much admire. *Isn't* it kind of her to come to us!"

Lord Marchmont, who was standing beside his wife, assisting her to receive her guests, bent over Nora's hand, and murmured something. He looked awfully tired and bored, and sniffed at his wife's bouquet, which he was holding for her in an absent-minded way. Parties of all kinds—especially his wife's—were an infliction for him, and he had a positive horror of celebrities and lions. He didn't understand them, and often remarked at his club, with a perplexed and melancholy sigh, that he didn't know what the devil the world was coming to, and that he expected to meet his tailor at dinner, and his boot-maker at an evening party. "Not that I care a hang," he always added, "but a fellow doesn't know who's who, don't you know."

"I think you will know a great many of the people here," said Lady Marchmont, in her kindest and sweetest manner. "No?" As Nora smiled and shook her head slightly. "Oh,

then, will you mind waiting with me for a moment or two? Nearly everybody who is coming is here, I think, and I want to introduce some people to you—in fact, everybody is dying to know you. And no wonder!” she added, with a charming smile.

Nora remained beside her, and got her head, so to speak; and presently the stream of arrivals grew thin and ran dry, and Lady Marchmont, with a sigh of relief, took her bouquet, with a “Thanks, Edward, you can go now—so kind of you to stay!” Lord Marchmont bowed, woke up for a moment, then made his way down the stairs with a kind of suppressed eagerness. Lady Marchmont smiled.

“My husband is off to his club,” she explained. “He dislikes parties, and is never happy unless he is playing whist—or seeing Miss Merton act. He is a great admirer of yours, my dear; but, then, we are all in the same boat!”

There was a frankness about her ladyship which was very taking; and Nora’s self-possession came back to her very quickly, as, with infinite tact, Lady Marchmont introduced her to one and another. Nora heard numerous titled names, and those of great celebrities, and she bowed or shook hands with apparent calm and ease—but her heart was beating fast. A band—the famous Hungarian band—was playing at the end of the west room, but no one seemed to be listening, and now and again the buzz of conversation and laughter pierced through the soft strains of music.

Nora did not know it, but her entrance had attracted a great deal of attention, and this rather quickly developed into a kind of sensation. As a rule—be it whispered—famous people are rather disappointing. The great statesman you have revered, proves, on close acquaintance, to be a bore; the painter is—is—not always as nicely dressed as he should be, and is generally a dumb dog; the poet turns out to be conceited and narrow-minded; and the actor and actress are—well, not so handsome and lovely as they are on the stage, and a good deal older without their paint and wigs. All these people had expected to find Nora quite middle-aged and plain—so used were they to disappointment; but this young and lovely girl, with the deep, violet eyes, and soft, black hair, took them by storm.

“What a wonderful young woman, my dear!” said a well-known duchess, as Nora passed with the last scientific man. “Quite a girl, and not a bit like an actress. Really, if I had not known who she was, I should have mistaken her for—for one of ourselves!”

Lady Marchmont was delighted.

"Isn't she, my dear duchess?" she responded. "But she is one of ourselves; at any rate, she comes of a very good family. Her father is a dean—"

The duchess smiled.

"I have heard that story," she said, blandly.

"But it is quite true. Mr. Foyle—do you know Mr. Foyle, duchess?—Mr. Spencer Foyle, you know—I think he is here to-night—says that it is quite true. We don't know which dean it is, because she wishes it to be kept secret; but you may rely on Mr. Foyle. Oh, it is true, and, of course, that accounts for it. I declare, I'm quite in love with her already."

The duchess smiled; Lady Marchmont was always in love with her latest lion.

"Poor girl!" she said.

"Why poor girl?" asked Lady Marchmont.

"Well, she seems so alone. There is nobody with her to-night, is there?"

"No; but you know, dear duchess, public characters can always dispense with a chaperone. Their—what do you call it?—fame gives them so much latitude and privilege."

The duchess nodded.

"Anyway, she seems a very nice girl," she said. "I wonder whether she would care to come to my little dance on the 19th?"

This is a very fair example of the effect Nora produced on the women. With the men it was, of course, victory all along the line. They had all admired and wept over her at the theatre; they were ready to worship her in society. They eagerly sought an introduction to her, and, having gained it, gathered round her, and paid her that ready and fluent homage which men in society find so easy. Nora did not know it, but she was really queening it in Lady Marchmont's salon, and her admirers were forming a kind of court round her.

And she found it so easy! She was almost inclined to smile at the fears and apprehensions which had attacked her before she came and conquered. She had thought that she would make mistakes; but she made none. She had only to be herself, speak, move naturally, and—that was all. Everybody seemed pleased, delighted, with her. She put on no airs and graces; did not, so to speak, pose as the last thing in actresses, but behaved just as one of the numerous daughters of the duchess behaved, and—that was all.

But every now and then, while she was talking to her little

court, she glanced round the room with a slightly preoccupied air. These were the kind of people Denis moved amongst: was it likely that he would be here? But she did not see Denis, and her heart, unsatisfied, fell somewhat.

Late in the evening, Lady Marchmont brought a young man—little more than a lad—to her.

"This is my nephew, Lord Vernon, Miss Merton," she said, and moved away again.

Lord Vernon—Vernie, as he was always called by his intimates—was a handsome boy, fresh from Oxford, and on his way to the Guards—he had seen Nora at the Duke's, and fallen in love with her then and there; and he stood bending before her as a devotee bends before his goddess, his face pale and red by turns, his ardent eyes reverential and worshipping. He was a marquis—the son of a powerful duke—and the men round her made way for him after a minute or two, and he sat beside her on the velvet lounge, and tried to talk to her.

"You must find this kind of thing an awful bore," he said, glancing up at her with his boyish blue eyes.

Nora smiled down on him. He was shorter than she was, and looked very young—though he was her senior by a year.

"Why?" she asked. "I think it is delightful. The beautiful rooms, and the music, and the people—"

"After the theatre, and the crowd clapping and roaring at you!" he said, almost reproachfully.

"Oh, that is different," said Nora.

"I should think so," he said, looking round with something like contempt. "I go to the Duke's every night!"

"Every night?" said Nora, with surprise.

"Yes," he said. "I've got a stall for the run of the piece. I used to have a stall at the Frivolity, but I've taken one for the Duke's—since you have been playing there." His eyes were raised to hers with fervent adoration.

Nora smiled.

"That is a very nice compliment to me, Lord Vernon, but I am not the principal actress. Miss Yorke—I saw her here just now—is the great attraction."

"Don't you believe it!" he said, just as one boy speaks to another. "You are the great attraction. And I don't wonder at it! There was never an actress like you, Miss Merton."

Nora laughed softly.

"How can you say so! You are very young—"

"Oh, don't say that!" he broke in, reproachfully. "I didn't think you'd ring that in on me! I'm not so young. I'll wager I'm older than you are."

"Perhaps," said Nora, very much amused by his earnestness.

"And I know what I'm talking about. I know all about the theatres, don't you know. And I'm so glad to see you here, where a fellow can talk to you quietly. I suppose they didn't give you my—my flowers, Miss Merton? I've sent you a bouquet every night—orchids, don't you know."

"Oh, yes; I've no doubt they did," replied Nora. "But I get so many bouquets—"

"I daresay," he said, with a sigh. "Every Johnnie sends flowers; but I only hope that you've noticed mine. I always send white ones—"

"It's very kind of you," said Nora, trying to cheer him. "I will try and remember and notice them."

"Do!" he said. "I think you are something splendid in that last scene; I do indeed! It's wonderful! I can scarcely help crying, though I've seen it so often."

He said a great deal more than this, and would have continued his histrionic praise *ad infinitum*, but Nora gently led him to talk of himself; of his cricket and driving, his fishing and shooting. He was a nice boy, and she liked him better than the other men who had clustered round her with compliments and adulation. In a vague way, he reminded her of Denis.

"Will you let me call upon you, Miss Merton?" he asked at last, and so modestly and reverentially that Nora could not help smiling at him. "I've got a coach—I don't mean a crammer—but a four-in-hand, don't you know, and perhaps"—his face flushed, and his voice grew boyishly eager—"perhaps you'll consent to come for a drive with me—and my sister," he added. "That's her—the girl in white over there. She's a great admirer of yours; thinks you're simply wonderful, as we all do. Let me call, will you?" He bent forward almost imploringly.

"Yes, certainly," said Nora, and she gave him her address.

"Thank you—thank you awfully!" he murmured. "I—who's this? Oh, Foyle—how do you do?"

Nora started slightly as Spencer Foyle came up, and she held out her hand. Lord Vernon got up with evident reluctance, and left them alone.

"Well?" said Foyle, looking at her with a smile.

"Well!" said Nora.

"So it is a success!" he said. "I congratulate you, and I congratulate myself upon the fulfilment of my prophecy."

"What do you mean?" asked Nora.

He smiled, with a cynical curve of his lips.

"You have won all along the line," he said, in a low voice.

"Lady Marchmont is spending the evening ringing your praises; the women are all envious of you; the men—well, a very fair sample has just left us. In short, Miss Merton has come, and seen, and conquered. Are you satisfied?"

Nora regarded him with wide-open eyes.

"What do you mean?"

"Simply that you will be as great a success in Society—with the capital 'S' as you are on the stage," he said. "There is no adverse opinion. I have been here for the last hour—"

"The last hour!"

"Yes; and I have been watching and listening," he responded. He did not add that he had been going about the room spreading and confirming the report that she was a lady *incognita*—a dean's daughter. "You are a great—an emphatic success. From to-night you have the *entrées* to any house you like. Do you know who that is who has just left you? He is the son of the Duke of Gorton. You smile! Yes, he is only a boy; but he carries weight beyond his years, and he counts. Are you convinced that I was right?"

\* \* \* \* \*

About this time, Denis and Culmer were sitting over their supper. The moon was at the full, a delicious breeze was floating through the mountain pines. Beside the pannikin of tea and stewed beef was a small iron-clamped box, which contained the fruit of their labour. The lid was open, and the light played with the dull, half-sultry gleam on a pile of opals. Both men eyed it in silence for a time as they took a drink of tea or ate a piece of the stewed beef.

They had worked like niggers, they had lived the lives of anchorites. From early morn till dewy eve their spades and picks had made a rough music in the grim solitude. They had seen no fellow-men, had enjoyed no recreation. Rest had been taken by fits and starts. An eager desire to delve, blast, gather wealth from Nature's womb had possessed them. All their talk had been of opals, all their thoughts had been of opals, as they had watched and dug and picked for them.

And there they lay in the box before them.

"Well, Denis, lad, what do you think of it?" asked Culmer, nodding towards the box—that precious box.

"It's a fine lot," said Denis.

He was burnt brown by the sun, his muscles were like steel, his hands like iron. He looked ten times the man he had seemed in Sedley's chambers. It is a wonderful air, is that of

Australia, and the terebine from the pines which surrounded their camp had got into Denis's lungs, and the glamour of the mountains had got into his blood; and his heart was still true to Nora. It was of her he had thought as he had worked early and late. It was of the good time coming, the time when he should be able to carry half of this wealth to England—to England! Oh! you who live at home at ease, how little you understand what that single simple word means!—and claim her. He dreamt of her at night. He thought of her by day. He put his love into every stroke of his pick, every heave of his spade. It was always Nora, Nora, Nora. At times he would feel her arms about his neck, her kiss upon his lips; and the thought, the feeling, had sustained him through many a trying day.

"Yes, a fine lot," said Culmer. "There's a heap of money in that box, Mr. Denis. If we keep at it, and the opals hold out—as they will, mark my words—we shall be rich men—I mean *rich* men—presently."

He lapsed into silence for a moment, and sucked at his pipe.

"What will you do with it, Mr. Denis?"

Denis smiled.

"What will you do with it, Culmer?" he asked, parrying the question.

Culmer's face grew grave, and he smoked in silence for a moment or two; then he said:

"Take it, and lay it down at my wife's feet, and say, 'There you are, old girl; it's yours.'"

Denis looked at him with some surprise.

"I didn't know you were married, Culmer," he said.

"Didn't you?" said Culmer, drily. "Don't know as I've mentioned it. Well, I am. An', what's more, I've got a little girl—a daughter. She was born before I left—" He paused for a moment, and sucked hard at his pipe. "An' this 'ere," he nodded at the box, "well, it's for her an' the missus, you see."

Denis nodded.

"I'm glad you're married, Culmer," he said. "You wouldn't know what to do with this pile otherwise."

"An' what will you do with yours, man?" asked Culmer.

Denis coloured. The moon was shining bright, and yet placid. The trees stood out in dark yet friendly outline. The air seemed to Denis full of Nora.

"Well—" he said, and hesitated. Then his love found voice. "There's a girl—I'm in love with, Culmer, and—and—and—"

Oulmer stretched out his hand, and got hold of Denis's.

"All right, Mr. Denis. Good luck to you! And, barring accidents, we'll be rich men, and happy 'uns—both of us. Hand me over the tea, Mr. Denis."

And, barring accidents—and Mr. Spencer Foyle—they would be rich, very rich indeed—and might be happy.

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## CHAPTER XXIX.

NORA was launched on the river of society on a flood-tide, and floated to an instant success. Lady Marchmont had not only "taken her up," but had grown attached to her; and the ladies of her set had, like sheep, promptly followed their leader.

They forgave Nora her beauty because of her modesty and complete lack of vanity; for Nora bore her society honours as meekly as she had borne her stage ones; indeed, she never ceased to regard with astonishment the impression which she made wherever she went. And she went out a great deal, accepting all the invitations which showered upon her; that is, all that did not clash with her work, for she allowed nothing to interfere with that, and was as earnest and painstaking with her part as she had been on the first night.

Wherever she went she met two parsons. One was Mr. Spencer Foyle, the other was the young marquis, Lord Vernon. Spencer Foyle, though he was present at the various receptions, dances, and excursions, never obtruded himself upon her—indeed, rather seemed to avoid her, and often only came to exchange a few words. But he was watching her closely, and once or twice Nora would meet his eyes regarding her with a curious smile which puzzled her. But he was always so respectful, so deferential, and so markedly refrained from taking advantage of his previous acquaintance with her, that Nora had almost forgotten her old dislike and distrust of him; almost, but not quite.

As for Lord Vernon, every one but Nora herself saw and smiled at his infatuation for her. He was continually at her side, surrounding her with those small attentions which a man pays to a woman with whom he is in love; and he racked his brains in inventing excuses and obtaining opportunities for being near her. It was a well-known fact that if you wanted to get Lord Vernon to a party you had but to let him know that Miss Olive Merton would be present.

He soon discovered that Nora was fond of the open air, and he displayed a remarkable ingenuity in planning drives on his



famous four-in-hand, and a still more remarkable ingenuity in getting her to occupy the seat beside him.

With a small but select party, he would drive her through the sunny lanes into the open country of heath and moor, where, at some out-of-the-way inn, they would find luncheon or afternoon tea awaiting them. There would be much laughter at the "roughing it," and, after a stroll, the drive back to the early dinner, so that Nora might be in time for her work at the theatre.

On these occasions, Dora Moberley always made one of the party, and her merry laugh and artless chatter often brought a smile of something like happiness to Nora's face. She did not herself laugh much; but generally sat very quiet and almost silent, gazing at the scenery through which they passed with dreamy and rather sad eyes. And the young marquis, sitting beside her, would take his eyes from his horses and glance at her wistfully.

"I often wonder what you are thinking of, Miss Merton," he said, one afternoon; and he looked at her timidly, and with a shy blush on his boyish face.

Nora almost started. She had been thinking of Marishannon and Denis; but she could scarcely tell Lord Vernon this.

"My thoughts are not worth the proverbial penny, Lord Vernon," she said.

"Aren't they? I'd give a great many pennies for them," he said, naively. "Sometimes I decide that you're thinking of your part—for you look now and then just as you do in your great scene. Then, at other times, I wonder whether you're thinking of anything real, anything that's happened to you, because—because, don't you know, there's a sad expression in your eyes, and sometimes you sigh—very gently, but I notice it, and—and it makes me unhappy, because I think *you're* unhappy."

"I should be very ungrateful to be unhappy when I am riding behind those beautiful horses, and through this lovely country, with such nice people, who are one and all so kind to me—kinder than I deserve, Lord Vernon."

"Nobody could be kinder to you than you deserve," he said, doggedly. "I wish I knew of anything I could do to— Oh! I'm an awful duffer at explaining myself, as I daresay you've found out; but you know what I mean."

"I know that you are always making people happy, Lord Vernon," she said, smiling on him frankly; "and that you couldn't possibly do more than you do, and that we are all very grateful to you."

"I don't want you to be grateful," he murmured, getting a little redder; "at least, not *you*." Then, seeing a rather puzzled look in her eyes, he stopped, and changed the subject quickly, afraid that he had gone too far, and fearful lest she should take alarm. "Pretty view, isn't it? It's a pity we can't go farther. We've got a place about fifteen miles along the road, and—and I should like you to see it. Perhaps you will some day."

"Perhaps," said Nora, innocently. And she smiled at him with the grave, half-sad smile which always made his heart beat fast with wistful longing.

"There's another place I should like you to see," he went on, as he drew the whip across the near horse, "up in Scotland. It's my father's favourite house; right in the centre of a deer forest, don't you know. Somehow, I think it would suit you."

"It sounds delightful," said Nora. "But why do you think it would suit me?"

"Oh, I don't know," he said, shyly. "I suppose because you are so different to the other women. They seem to care for nothing but the racket of London—dances, and all that kind of thing—whereas you are always so fond of the country, and so—so quiet and grave, don't you know."

Nora laughed.

"That sounds as if I were rather a dull person."

"No, no!" he made haste to interrupt. "You are never dull. How could you say such a thing? Why, I'd rather sit here beside you, with you saying nothing—just nothing at all—" He stammered, and stopped. "Not a bad mare that, is it?" and he flicked one of the wheelers.

"Yes, I am fond of the country," said Nora, when she had duly praised the mare. "I was brought up in it, in a very wild and out-of-the-way spot."

"Yes?" he said, quickly, as if he were eager to hear more.

But Nora only said, with a tiny little sigh: "And sometimes I miss it. That is why I enjoy these drives so much, Lord Vernon."

"Well, you can have as many as you want," he said, promptly and cheerfully. "I'll have 'em put-to every day while the weather lasts."

Nora laughed.

"No, no! We could not take up so much of your time," she said, brightly.

"My time!" he echoed, mockingly. "Why, I don't know what to do with it as it is, and I'm never so happy as when

you—when I'm driving about, don't you know." He glanced at her with shy adoration as he spoke, but Nora was looking at a quaint farmhouse they were passing at the moment, and did not see the glance; but Foyle, who was sitting close behind, making mock love to Miss Moberley, saw it, and smiled sardonically. He was not at all afraid. He held the cards in his hand, and he thought that he could trump Lord Vernon's suit at any moment.

They had a delightful afternoon, and drove back in good time. Every now and then, as they bowled along, Lord Vernon's hand strayed to his breast pocket, in which lay a certain morocco case. He had been trying all the afternoon to pluck up courage enough to offer this said morocco case, and its contents, to Nora, but had failed; but that evening, when she went into her dressing-room, she found a small square parcel lying on the table before the glass.

"Lord Vernon's man brought it, miss," said her dresser.

"Lord Vernon's man!" repeated Nora, with surprise. "Oh, it must be something I dropped this afternoon; but I don't remember losing anything."

She opened the parcel carelessly, but as the light flashed upon the magnificent diamond heart which lay on its bed of purple satin, her face flushed, then went pale.

It was not the first present that had been offered her—presents which had invariably gone back, "with Miss Merton's compliments," to the would-be donors; but Nora felt that she could scarcely return this so coldly and ceremoniously.

The boy—he was, of course, only a boy in her eyes—had always been so respectful, so modest in his kindness and attentions, that she could not, so to speak, throw his gift in his face.

The dresser uttered an involuntary exclamation of admiration at the magnificence of the trinket—a kind of gasp; but Nora said nothing, and slipped the case in her pocket, and when she got home, locked it up in a drawer without looking at it again.

The next afternoon, Lord Vernon was announced. There had been several visitors that afternoon, Lady Marchmont amongst them, and Nora, who liked to have a period of quietude before her work, was on the point of saying, "Not at home," when she remembered the diamonds, and nodded to the maid to admit him.

He came in; he was more carefully dressed even than usual, with an orchid in his button-hole, and his fair hair smooth and sleek; the very type of the well-groomed young aristo-

crat. He was rather pale, Nora noticed, and there was an anxious look in his blue eyes.

"It's kind of you to see me," he said. "I—I came to ask whether you weren't knocked up with that long drive yesterday, and—and—the maid said you were at home, and—and perhaps would see me."

"I am not at all tired," said Nora, as she gave him her hand. "It was a delightful drive. And I am glad you have called. I wanted to see you, Lord Vernon, and to give you something—will you wait a moment? And sit down?"

She was only gone a moment or two, and his heart sank as he saw the case in her hand.

"I want to return you this, Lord Vernon," she said; and, though she spoke firmly, her voice was very low and gentle, and her eyes rested on him kindly and a little sadly.

He flushed to the roots of his fair hair, and his lips quivered.

"Won't you—won't you keep it?" he said, painfully.

Nora shook her head.

"I never accept presents, Lord Vernon," she said, still with the gentle note in her voice. "Why should I?"

"I don't know?" he said. "No, you're right; why should you? That is, from—from other people. But I hoped that you would from me."

"Why from you, Lord Vernon?" asked Nora, with the shadow of a smile in her lovely eyes at his simplicity.

"Because—because we've been such friends. I mean because you've been so good to me, and—and—I hoped that you'd take it—it's a stupid kind of thing—because, if you did, I should know you weren't angry with me for—for loving you."

Nora did not start, but her face went rather pale, and her brows came together. He was almost frightened, awed by the expression, but, taking a step nearer, raised his head with sudden frankness and courage which became him well. Blood always tells: drive your Lord Vernons into a corner and they will forget their shyness and show fight in the good old English fashion.

"You know I love you," he said, without a stammer now, his blue eyes meeting hers bravely. "I've loved you ever since the first night we met at Lady Marchmont's; you've forgotten all about it, I daresay, but I haven't. And I've gone on loving you until, now, I can't *help* loving you."

Nora stood with the case in her hand, her eyes fixed on his face, a faint look of trouble in the lines on her forehead.

"I know you think I'm only a boy—that I don't know my

own mind—but I'm older than you, and I'm old enough to know that I love you with all my heart, and that if—if you refuse to be my wife, I shan't know another moment's happiness while I live. Will you try and—and love me a little—will you be my wife, Olive?"

Nora sank into the low chair near her, her hands clasped over the case, her lips tightly set. It had come upon her as a surprise, a bolt from the blue. She had been so absorbed in the thought of Denis that it had never occurred to her that this fair-haired boy, this spoilt darling of the fashionable world, could possibly fall in love with her. She was so full of sorrow for him, so full of self-reproach for her blindness, that she could not speak, and, though her set face struck him with apprehension, her silence gave him courage to go on.

"I know I'm—I'm not worthy of you," he said; "you—you are so beautiful, so good, and so clever—why, all the world's talking about you and admiring you! But I love you, and I don't think any fellow could try harder to make you happy than I will, if you will only give me a chance. And so—so, though I know it's like my cheek, I've plucked up courage to—to ask you to marry me. Will you?"

He put the question again, frankly, modestly; as if he were a mere commoner, struggling for his daily bread, instead of the heir to a dukedom; and he waited for the verdict with as much fear and trembling as any city clerk would have felt.

Nora raised her eyes and looked up at him, and he read his fate in the sad, gentle gaze.

"No; I cannot be your wife, Lord Vernon," she said, very gently, very softly, but also very firmly.

He drew a long breath, and his face, which had been flushed with the eagerness of his prayer, grew white. But he pulled himself upright, as a brave young fellow does when he gets "one from the shoulder."

"You—you don't care for me?" he said, almost inaudibly.

Nora's lips moved. It was hard to have to strike him with the cruel "No!"

He bent his head for a moment, and at that moment Nora thought of Donovan. Love levels all ranks, and in that second or two the two men, peer and peasant, looked very much alike. But she had only a little pity for Donovan, while her heart ached for this blue-eyed boy.

"I am very sorry. What can I say to show you how sorry, how grieved, I am?" she murmured, with a tenderness that made matters worse for him, for he wanted her love, not her pity. "I did not know—I never dreamt that you—you—"

"Would fall in love with you?" he said. "Why, how could I help it? Don't you know how—how beautiful you are? And it isn't that only. There are plenty of pretty women one doesn't fall in love with; it's—it's—oh! I can't make you understand how sweet and good you are; how far above other women—"

"Oh! hush, hush!" she said, flushing for a moment. "You will not think so always. I hope you will—I *know* you will—soon meet with some one who is really all you only think me, Lord Vernon."

"Oh, no, I shan't!" he said, with an air of conviction and despair. "If it can't be you, then—then it shall be no one else. Are you sure—" He paused a moment. "I'm too late—is that it?"

She was silent, while the clock ticked loudly, but not more loudly than his heart beat, the young man thought. Then she raised her eyes.

"Yes," she said, very softly; "you are too late. There is some one else—no, don't ask me who it is," she went on, quickly, as she saw the question in his eyes. "I—I cannot tell you. It is no one you know. I have not seen him for a long time—" She paused, until he thought that she would say no more; but she went on: "We parted before I came to London; and he has gone, I do not know where. It is almost as if he were dead—but I know that he is not dead—that he is alive. And if he were not, I should still belong to him."

His head dropped, and he gnawed at his lip.

"Yes," he said; "you'd be true till death—and beyond it! Well, he's a lucky beggar, whoever he is, and wherever he is—and—I wish I were in his place!"

He turned aside, and Nora knew, somehow, that it was to hide the tears which had been even in his voice.

"I—I suppose you won't care to see me after this?" he said.

Nora looked at him wistfully.

"Why not?" she said. "You have paid me the greatest honour a man can pay a woman, Lord Vernon, and—and though I cannot do what you want, there is no reason why I should lose a friend—if you care to remain a friend only."

"You're—you're very good to me!" he said, rather thickly. "Yes, I'd rather have you for a friend than any other girl for a sweetheart."

After a pause, he nodded towards the diamond heart.

"You may as well keep that," he said. "You've got my real heart, you know." And he tried to smile.

Nora shook her head, and placed the case in his hand.

"It is too rich, too costly," she said, gently. "If—if you cared to give me that flower in your coat—"

He took the orchid out quickly but carefully, and held it out to her.

"I was hoping that you'd take me, myself, and—and everything belonging to me," he said. "But I'll have to be content with this, I suppose."

"I will keep it always—always!" she said. "But I shall not need it to remind me that I have a true friend, Lord Vernon."

She held out her hand, and he took it, looked down at it for a moment as a man might look at something very precious which he is parting with forever, then he bent over it and kissed it.

Nora heard him going down the stairs, slowly and heavily. He generally came up them two or three at a time, like the boy he was. And her pity followed him softly, with the rustle of an angel's wings. For she knew what love was, and how it hurts!

Now, before a couple of days had passed, the world knew that Miss Olive Merton had refused the Marquis of Vernon, and a future ducal coronet. Perhaps Dora guessed what had passed, and dropped a word—and it is quite sufficient to whisper one word in such cases—or perhaps Vernon's friends at the club guessed it from the young man's manner; for Lord Vernon behaved very strangely that day. He was silent and preoccupied—he who was always so "chatty" and light-hearted. He refused a drink, declined to play billiards, quarrelled with his dinner and his closest friend; in short, behaved generally and unmistakably like the man who has been rejected.

Anyhow, the rumour spread, was not contradicted. Lord Vernon, when gently asked the question, turned on his interrogator, and desired to be informed why the deuce he didn't mind his own business! And Society was at first smitten with amazement, and then filled with admiration for the girl who could find it possible to refuse so magnificent an offer.

Gossips of both sexes went about with: "Have you heard this about Vernon and Miss Merton, of the Duke's? He proposed to her—he did, indeed!—and *she refused him!* It's a fact, I assure you. Good lord! fancy any girl, to say nothing of an actress, refusing the future Duke of Gorton!"

It is scarcely necessary to say that Nora became more popular and sought after than before; the men became more de-

voted, and, if it were possible, more respectful; and the women regarded her with something like awe, as the one woman in the world high-minded enough to refuse the match of the season. Far greater personages than the Marchmonts called on her at her dainty little rooms, and she received invitations to houses which were celebrated for their exclusiveness.

One night, about a week after Vernon's rejection, Spencer Foyle was dining with the Esdailes. He had called at the house in Clansmere Gardens, and had managed, with his usual art, to ingratiate himself, not only with Lord Esdaile, but with Lady Blanche. With the latter it had been easy work, for Blanche, in her ignorance, regarded Mr. Spencer Foyle as a perfect specimen of the fashionable world; and was not only flattered by his attentions, but quite prepared to be fascinated by him.

He had dined there several times, and had accompanied them to concerts and theatres, and now and again to parties at the houses of the quiet people whom Lord Esdaile knew. Lady Blanche had found it delightful to have such a man as Mr. Foyle at her beck and call; and Foyle had been quick to see her liking and admiration for him, and also quick to see his advantage.

Once or twice it had occurred to him that it would be a good thing to be Lady Blanche's husband, and the son-in-law of Lord Esdaile; and to-night, as he sat by Lady Blanche's side and talked—and how well Mr. Spencer Foyle could talk when he liked!—and felt, rather than saw, the admiration in her bold eyes, he wondered whether the thing were possible.

He knew that Lord Esdaile was not rich, and that he certainly would not give his daughter to a poor man—and a commoner to boot. But Spencer Foyle, as he glanced at her, and then across the room at her father, absorbed in the *Times*, thought of Mr. Levison's Australian speculation, and wondered whether, if he came with a fortune in his hand, Lord Esdaile would decline him.

"I suppose we shall be going back soon," said Lady Blanche, after a pause. "A horrid nuisance, isn't it?" And she pouted her full lips, and sighed impatiently. "I wish father would let or sell Esdaile, and come and live in London, at any rate, for the season. I adore London, don't you?"

"Not as a general thing," he said. "I have enjoyed these last few weeks—but then you—and Lord Esdaile—have made them very pleasant to me."

She turned her large eyes upon him, and smiled with open gratification.



"How nicely you say that kind of thing," she said, with a laugh. "Of course, you don't mean it?"

"Indeed I do," he said. "You cannot guess how much I have enjoyed my visit here, and our outings together. And now you tell me that they are to come to an end. I shall miss you very much, Lady Blanche."

She coloured and bridled with pleased vanity.

"And I am sure I shall miss you, Mr. Foyle, and—and London altogether."

"London first and most? Ah, yes!" he said, with a delicate touch of reproach.

"We have been quite like old friends, haven't we?" she said, after a pause. "But you won't really miss me. You will remain in London with all the fun; while I shall be carted over to Ireland, and be buried in that awful hole! I never realised what a wretched place it was until I came up to town."

"I don't think I shall remain in London," he said, in a low voice, for he did not want Lord Esdaile to hear him. "I think of leaving England."

"Of leaving England! I suppose you mean that you are going to the Riviera, or one of those winter places? How lucky for you! How I wish I were going!"

"No," he said. "I am going abroad—to Australia."

"Really!" she exclaimed, staring at him in the way which always annoyed and hurt Lady Esdaile. "What on earth are you going there for?"

Spencer Foyle leant forward a little, so that he could speak very softly.

"I am going to make money, I hope," he said. "I am, unfortunately, not a rich man."

"No?" she said, eyeing him curiously, and evidently very much interested.

"No," he said. "A little while ago I did not feel the misfortune; lately it has come home to me, and I have realised how bad it is to be poor."

There was something in his voice, a significance which made her lower her eyes.

"What has happened lately?" she asked, with a faint laugh.

"Just this: that I have discovered something that I want, want very badly, and I know that I cannot get it while I am poor. So you see why I am going to Australia."

"I wonder what it is," she said, with a glance and a smile.

Spencer Foyle looked across at the motionless figure behind the *Times*.

"If I were brave enough to tell you, I am afraid you would be very much surprised, and very angry at my presumption," he replied.

"Should I?" she said. "You might try, mightn't you? I shouldn't faint with astonishment, or kill you, you know."

"I cannot risk it," he murmured, after a pause, as if he had been considering whether he should speak out. "But, Lady Blanche, if my undertaking out there should prove successful, I may find courage to tell you what it is I want; and may I hope that you will not be angry?"

He touched the lace on her sleeve with a pleading gesture, and looked into her eyes imploringly; and Blanche coloured, and softly gnawed her under lip.

"How can I say, unless you tell me what it is?" she said, with a pout.

"I dare not," he murmured. "Ah! do you think it costs me nothing to remain silent? Indeed, indeed it does! But I must not speak—yet. If all goes well, and I come back poor no longer, but rich—then, then I will tell you."

His hand slid forward to her arm; but, at that moment, the paper rustled and fell, and Lord Esdaile looked across at the clock. Lady Blanche flushed, and drew a little away from Foyle; but he was too wise to start, and simply fell back, with his arms behind his head.

"We are going to Lady Percival's reception," she said. "Isn't it a nuisance?" she added, with an affectation of reluctance; an affectation only, for the reception was the most important of the short season, and an invitation was much coveted.

"I, too, am going," said Spencer Foyle, rising.

Her face brightened.

"You may as well come with us, then, may not he, father?"

"Certainly," said Lord Esdaile, courteously, but not too enthusiastically; but Spencer Foyle knew better than to accept.

"Thanks," he said; "but I have to call upon a friend on the way, unfortunately. But I shall be there almost as soon as you."

He held her hand a little longer than was necessary, and felt his pressure returned; and, as he got into a hansom, he smiled with cynical satisfaction.

"She's a fine girl—but vulgar," he said. "But she's the daughter of a peer, and I might do worse. It will be something to be Lord Esdaile's son-in-law."

The hansom pulled up at Cavendish Mansions, and he went up to Mr. Levison's rooms. Mr. Levison was sitting with the evening paper on his knee, a big cigar in his thick lips, and a bottle of champagne at his elbow.

"Hallo, Foyle!" he exclaimed, with boisterous welcome. "I was just going to look you up! You've come in the nick of time."

"What is it?" asked Foyle, languidly eyeing him through half-closed eyes.

"Tusker's come back from that place in Ireland—can't remember the beastly name. The man he wanted ain't there, and ain't been there, so far as Tusker can make out; so that you and him will have to go alone. That'sh if you mean going; and you'll have to make up your mind now, my boy."

"Did Tusker see Mrs.—what's the name—Neil?" asked Foyle, carelessly.

"No; he didn't want to raise her curiosity, and set her talking; so he made enquiries in the place. He's just thiah minute gone—I'll send for him, if you like."

"No matter," said Foyle; "I can't wait. I'm going on to Lady Percival's."

"Are you, now!" exclaimed Levison, with awe. "Regular shwell affair, ain't it?"

Foyle shrugged his shoulders.

"You want my answer, Levison?"

"I just do. Fact is, my boy, I want the thing put in hand at once; and if you can't, or won't go—well, I've got my eye on another man."

Foyle smiled incredulously.

"I will go," he said, quietly.

Levison jumped up heavily, and held out his thick, be-ringed hand.

"Right! Shake, old man! 'Ere, 'ave a glassh of wine on it! And when will you shtart, eh?"

"When you like—in three days," said Foyle. "No wine, thanks."

"Oh! but just a glassh!"

"In three days, or later—just as you please," said Foyle, moving towards the door. He paused, with his hand on the handle. "By-the-way, you may book me a state-room, with two berths—I like plenty of room. Good-night."

"'Ere," expostulated Mr. Levison. "Don't go like that! We've made no arrangements—no nothink!"

"You and Tusker can come round to my rooms to-morrow night. I can't wait now; I've promised to meet some people,

and am late already," and, with a curt nod, he sauntered out. Mr. Levison swore under his breath.

"Confound his impudence! But he's just the man for it—just the man; and I've got to put up with it, I suppose."

### CHAPTER XXX.

SPENCER FOYLE got into his hansom, and lit a cigarette. As he smoked, the languid, listless air he had assumed for Mr. Levison's benefit disappeared. His eyes gleamed with a keen and calculating expression, his thin lips pressed the cigarette tightly.

"Yes," he muttered, as the cab began to slow up at Carlton Terrace. "She can't escape; I've got her fixed too tightly. Out there, at Marishannon, she would have laughed me to scorn; but it's different now. No woman could face it; certainly no woman with her pride. I'll strike the blow to-night."

He smiled meditatively for a moment or two as the cab made its way into the long line, and a smile of audacity crossed his face. "It's awkward having two birds in hand; but I'll risk it. She's worth it—my beautiful wild Irish girl!"

As he entered the magnificent saloon, he saw Lady Blanche standing a little way in, and having bowed to Lady Percival, who did not know him from Adam—one half the brilliant crowd were strangers to her—he went straight to the girl. She received him with barely concealed eagerness.

"Oh, I'm glad you've come!" she said—she was flushed with excitement and gratification at being present. "I want you to tell me who's who. All sorts of famous people are here, aren't they?"

He nodded, and pointed out some of the statesmen and celebrities, the great ladies and fashionable lions; and as he did so, he saw a small crowd in a corner of the room, and caught a glimpse of the face of the central figure. It was Nora, surrounded, as usual. She was listening to a short, thick-set man, with a blue ribbon across his waistcoat, but there was a dreamy, far-away look in her eyes, and her smile was rather rare and fitful.

He had not expected to see Nora there, and he drew Lady Blanche's attention to the other end of the room; but she looked round again almost immediately.

"They say that Miss Merton, the actress—who refused the Marquis of Vernon, you know—the Miss Merton is here," she said, eagerly. "I heard two gentlemen talking about her

just before you came in. Do find her for me, will you?" and she pressed his arm. Foyle looked round as if in search of that famous personage.

"I don't see her," he said, coolly, even as his eyes wandered from Nora's face. "She may have gone away; it is late, you know."

"Oh, I'm sorry. What a nuisance! I wanted to see her off the stage!" said Blanche.

"Never mind; you will some day. Come into the fernery;" and he drew her arm closer to his side. But as they were moving away, Blanche heard a gentleman say: "The Merton is holding a grander court than usual to-night," and, following his eyes, she saw Nora. She started, and her gaze grew rather wild, and her mouth opened.

"What is the matter?" asked Spencer Foyle, with the touch of languor which he always assumed when he was driven into a corner.

"Why—why—I know that girl—that Miss Merton!" said Blanche.

"Yes?" he said, quietly. "You have met her somewhere?"

"Met her? I should think so! Why, she's—she's a girl from our village, a work-girl, peasant, you know! Her name's—"

"Hush!" he said, laughing softly. "These people standing near us are listening—and smiling. What an extraordinary mistake!"

"Mistake!" she echoed, looking up at him with a frown of bewilderment.

"Why, yes," he said, with a slight drawl. "Miss Merton's the daughter of a clergyman—a dean; it is well known."

"She is!" said Lady Blanche, her face red, her lips still parted. "Well, it's the most extraordinary likeness! And, yet, now I come to look at her, I can see it's a mistake." She laughed scornfully. "She's too beautiful and grand to be Nora Neil of Marishannon."

"Oh, that girl!" he said. "Ah, yes, I think I remember her. Miss Merton is a little like her, but—!" He smiled significantly.

"Of course; I see now! It was ridiculous of me to make the mistake," she said, biting her lip, and ashamed of her supposed blunder. "I should like to speak to her. Do you know her? Do introduce me—you can, I suppose? I see no end of ladies talking to her, as if—as if they were really friends of hers."

He smiled, and his thin lips curved with amused contempt of her ignorance and arrogance.

"Oh, yes," he said. "Miss Merton is quite one of themselves, and bids fair to be the social idol next season. I'll take you to her presently," he added, already mentally framing some excuse for not doing so; but he was saved the trouble, for Lord Esdaile came up.

"Oh, here you are, Blanche!" he said. "I want to introduce you to some friends of your mother's. Thank you, Mr. Foyle."

Blanche cast a sullen look over her shoulder as she went off.

"A parcel of old fogies!" she whispered. "I know what 'friends of mother's' will be like!"

Foyle waited until she had disappeared in the crowd, then he went across the room, and gradually got near to Nora. He made his deep obeisance to the Serene Highness who was talking to her, then, as his Serenity turned for a moment to speak to some one else, Foyle bent towards Nora, and whispered:

"Lady Blanche is here!"

Nora started slightly, and her face paled. She did not fear Lady Blanche, or Lady any one else, but the name recalled the painful scenes which had taken place beside the lake. She stood looking before her in her old statuesque attitude, and Foyle, as if he read her like a book, said, still in the same low voice:

"You would like to leave? Let me take you to your carriage."

She inclined her head, and gave him her arm, and he led her through the room, keeping away from the side to which Lady Blanche had gone. As they passed, the crowd looked at her with keenest interest, and men bowed, and women smiled; but Nora's eyes were fixed before her, and, though she inclined her head in response, it was evident that her thoughts were elsewhere than at Lady Percival's.

Outwardly Spencer Foyle was calm and cool as an iceberg, but his heart beat fast as he thought, "She is afraid even of being recognised as Nora Neil!"

As he put her into the brougham, he said, softly: "I am afraid you are tired to-night."

Nora smiled absently. "I think I am," she said. "The crowd was very great, and the rooms were hot—"

"—And his Serene Highness rather trying!" he said, with a smile. He did not say, "Good-night." The moment the brougham had got away, he leapt into a hansom cab.

"Follow that carriage!" he said, sharply.

Nora leant back, and closed her eyes, and drew a long sigh. The night had been a triumph for her; for she had not only been present at the great reception, but had shone as one of the stars. Men had flocked round her, a prince royal had talked—and talked much—to her; women of high rank had treated her as an equal. She was, as Lady Blanche would have put it, at the top of the tree. And yet—and yet! Oh, how gladly she would have exchanged her fame, her popularity, her social position, for the humblest of cots in old Ireland—with Denis by her side! Where was he? As she asked herself the question, her heart ached, and this "queen of the stage and society," as the papers loved to call her, hid her face in her hands, and uttered a tearless sob.

She got out of the brougham, and went upstairs to the drawing-room—the little room to which so many great people were fond of coming—and moved to the glass to take off her cloak. As she did so, she saw a figure behind her reflected in the antique mirror.

She turned, more amazed than startled, and regarded Spencer Foyle with cold surprise and anger.

"Forgive me!" he said, in a low voice.

"How did you come here?" she asked, her eyes like steel.

He put out his hands deprecatingly.

"I followed you," he said. "The maid thought I had come with you. Once more, forgive me! I wanted to see you—I must see you, speak to you—and to-night!"

Nora drew herself up, and looked at him as an empress might regard a subject who had intruded upon her privacy.

"Not to-night; it is too late," she said, calmly. "Go, please."

"I cannot go until I have said what I have to say," he said, with a feigned desperation and excitement. "I shall not keep you many minutes. I beg you will hear me!"

Nora thought rapidly. Dora was in bed, but the maid, who waited upon them, could be summoned in a moment. Anger, resentment, flashed for a moment in her eyes. That he should dare to follow her, and gain an entrance to her rooms at this hour of the night, seemed almost incredible. The very audacity of the act paralysed her for a moment.

"I do not understand what you can have to say to me that should warrant this intrusion," she said.

He came forward, and took her hand. She started, and glanced at the bell, and instantly he glided between her and it, and regarded her with a steady, almost defiant air.

Nora stared at him.

"You must leave my rooms at once, if you please," she said. "At once."

"Wait," he said. "If you tell me to go after you have heard what I have to say, I promise to go. But you must hear me. Nora, I am leaving England immediately; this is, perhaps, my last chance of seeing you alone. And I have seized it. Can you not guess why I have come? Have you been so blind as not to see that—I love you?"

She looked at him steadily. Had he gone mad, or was he—? But there was no sign of intoxication in his face or voice.

"I love you!" he repeated. "I cannot live without you. Ah, why do you look at me as if you were surprised, angry? You must know—"

Nora looked over her shoulder towards the door, and he smiled to himself.

"It is locked," he said, quietly. "Nora, I want you to listen to me, and—be sensible. I am going to leave England, and I want you to go with me."

She found her voice at last. "You must be mad!" she said; but she spoke to herself, rather than to him.

"No; I am not mad," he said. "You are surprised, startled. And yet you should not be! Think, look back! Was it only a friendly interest which prompted me to tempt you to come to London? was it only a friendly interest, do you think, which induced me to guide you on the road to the success you have achieved? No, it was because I loved you, because I intended to win you—"

Nora raised her hand to enforce his silence.

"Yes, you are mad," she said, calmly. "Leave the house at once; I will not listen to you."

"—Day by day, week by week, I have watched you, watched and waited for the hour when I could tell you of my love, show you my heart, and claim your own."

Nora still gazed at him with blank amazement and a stupor of anger. There was no fear in her heart, only a fierce indignation and loathing.

"Have you finished?" she asked. "If so—"

"Not yet," he said, and with a change in his voice and manner. He dropped the frenzy of the lover, and became something like himself, cynical, and coldly languid, as if assured of his success. "I leave England in three days, and I want you to accompany me. Wait; you will put forward innumerable obstacles, I know; but what are they worth? As for the Duke's, the excuse of sudden indisposition will suffice;



and for the rest—!" He shrugged his shoulders. "It has been a pretty comedy, and you have played your part well; but it has had its run, and must give place to a new one. We will leave England quietly; we will go where happiness, such as few men and women find, is awaiting us—"

Nora's face set, her eyes blazed.

"If you are neither mad nor intoxicated, you must have some purpose in this insult, Mr. Foyle," she said. "Please explain as shortly as possible, and—go."

"I have explained," he said. "I love you, Nora. I cannot live without you. I cannot leave England without you. You will not refuse—"

Nora laughed—it was rather an hysterical laugh, but full of scorn and contempt.

"Excuse me. Do you wish me to treat you as a rational being and not as the madman you seem? Well, then—I refuse the insult of your love, and I—"

"No, you will not refuse," he said, quietly, "not when I tell you what refusal would cost you."

"Cost me?" she said, coldly, haughtily.

"Yes," he said; and he leant against the mantelshelf, and regarded his polished boot, resting on the fender, with a critical air. "Yes; cost you your place in society, your berth at the theatre, the respect of all who have well-nigh worshipped you."

"I—don't understand you!" she said. "Why do you talk this nonsense—why have you come here to—to insult me?"

"Is my love an insult, Nora?" he said. "Oh, believe I love you; try and believe how greatly it pains me to threaten you—"

"Threaten! With what?"

She drew herself to her full height, imperial in her beauty and her scorn.

"Ah, you are splendid!" he said, with a long breath. "No wonder they are so infatuated with you! No wonder poor Lord Vernon lost his heart—and his head! But they are so fickle, the public, high and low alike; and I give you my word that the world which now worships Miss Olive Merton would turn upon her with scorn and derision if it knew—what I know."

Nora looked at him in a kind of stupor.

"If it knew? Oh, you are mad!" she said. "You threaten me with disclosing the fact that I am Nora Neil—"

"Pardon me!" he said. "You are not Nora Neil, but Nora Fawsett, the daughter of a convict!"

## CHAPTER XXXI.

"You are Nora Fawsett—the daughter of a convict!" Spencer Foyle repeated slowly, and with a pleasant smile.

Nora regarded him for a moment as if she had not heard him, or, hearing, understood; then she uttered a faint cry, and, as if he had actually struck her, staggered back against the wall, her hands outstretched as if to ward off the repetition of a blow.

Foyle thought she was going to faint, and he looked round for some water. But after a moment she let her hands fall to her side and drew a long breath.

"It—it is not true!" she panted. But something in his face, in the manner in which he had dealt the cruel stab, told her heart that for once he was not lying.

"Excuse me," he said, slowly and coolly; "it is quite true."

She hid her face in her hands, and he saw her sway to and fro, as if she were going to fall; then, looking beyond him, she said, shudderingly:

"Tell—tell me—!"

"Certainly!" he said, as if she had asked him to tell her the time. "I see you do not know the truth of your parentage. I am grieved that you should have forced me to acquaint you with it. But"—he shrugged his shoulders—"you women will never be satisfied until you feel the hand of steel under the velvet glove. In a word, your father, whose name, real or assumed, is Fawsett, as I have said, was concerned with another man in the robbery of a Belgian bank clerk. It went very near to murder; but the poor devil recovered, fortunately—for your father, who did his term of penal servitude, instead of being—" He paused, and smiled sardonically. "I imagine, in fact, I know, that he is out on a ticket-of-leave; and I should fancy that he is the sort of man who would be delighted to claim Miss Olive Merton, the famous actress."

Nora sank into a chair, but rose again, as if she could not endure to show any weakness before him.

"And—and my mother? She knew?" she said, almost inaudibly.

"Yes, certainly. Hence the change of name and strict retirement. Poor woman, I pity her; but, my dear Nora, I pity you most! A terrible ordeal is before you! It would not

have mattered so much if the knowledge had come to you when you were in humble circumstances, and unknown; you would not have suffered so keenly; but now—!" He shrugged his shoulders again, and took out his cigarette-case. "May I be permitted to smoke? To tell you the truth, I am rather upset. Thanks," he said, though she had accorded him no permission by word or sign. "Try and picture the sensation the news will create!" he went on. "'The Queen of the Stage and Society' discovered not to be the daughter of a respectable clergyman, a dean, but—a convict! A convict! If he had only been a working-man, an honest man, however low in the social scale, it would not have mattered; all the more credit to you for rising so high in the same social scale. It would not have mattered, the world would have said, and I think you might have kept your popularity; but—a convict! There is something hopeless, final, about it. It makes a stain, a mark, which nothing can wash out. It is too shameful, disgraceful!"

He blew the smoke from his cigarette in delicate rings, and watched them as they floated slowly to the ceiling. "Think of Lord Vernon's humiliation, degradation; of the laughter, the enjoyment, of society over his discomfiture. Think of all your great friends—the people who have been so 'kind' to you, as you always put it."

She put her hand to her brow, and pushed back the hair, with a gesture of agony and despair.

"The papers will be grateful; it is a slack time, and they will seize on the story with avidity. There will be paragraphs, letters, leaders, in all which they will, while pretending to sympathise with you, dilate on the story with all its details. They will rake up the trial, describe the robbery and well-nigh murder; they will find a portrait of your father—or invent one—and publish it alongside of yours. Yes, there is a good time before the papers; and I almost wish I were the proprietor of a society journal. And it will be a good thing for the Duke's! Why, the theatre will be crammed for the next year to see the famous actress who is—the daughter of a convict!"

He laughed softly, the laugh of a fiend revelling in, gloating over, the misery of the victim writhing under his torture.

But the laugh acted like a tonic—like the stimulant of a lash—upon Nora. She turned her face away, and clenched her hands until the nails cut into the short palms. She felt as if she were dying by inches, but that she would die without word or sign.

He glanced at the averted face.

"Can't you see it all, Nora?" he asked, gravely. "But, of course you can; you have imagination, intellect; you see it all as plainly as I do. There is no hope for you. Let but a whisper of the truth be uttered, and—you are ruined, completely, irretrievably ruined! And great indeed will be the fall! To-night, there is not a more popular actress on the boards, there is not a more popular woman in society, than Miss Olive Merton; to-morrow, there will be no woman so low in the world of scandal, so deep in the mire of shame, as she will be."

She turned and looked at him. Her face was white and set, and there were dark shadows under her eyes, her lips were strained as if she were in mortal agony.

"Who—who knows this besides yourself?" she asked and he almost started at the sound of her voice, so hoarse and changed had it become.

"No one," he replied. "Please do not doubt me." For there was the cold scorn of unbelief in her eyes. "I shall not utter one word that is untrue. Why need I? The truth is enough for my purpose. No one knows the story of your parentage—your real name. Your mother has kept the secret well—she would, naturally! Your father"—Nora winced and shuddered—"has disappeared. It was by the merest chance that I discovered the truth. I happened to hear the story of the robbery in which your father was concerned from his partner in the crime. He knew where your mother was living, and her name, or assumed name; but he did not know that you had left home, and would never know that Miss Olive Merton was—what she is. How should he? How should any one know? No, your secret lies, so to speak, in the hollow of my hand. I have only to keep it closed, and it will remain hidden forever; but I have only to open my hand, and fling it forth, and it will be scattered, like seed, all over the civilised world."

He made the appropriate gesture, and Nora watched him as if fascinated. Indeed, there was something fascinating, mesmeric, in the man's unscrupulous and fiendish cruelty. There is something fascinating in the loathsome beauty of a deadly snake, in its sinuous movements, in the exquisite glitter of its eye. Nora shuddered, and felt as if she were under a spell, a hideous, soul-benumbing spell. She could not think, could scarcely realise the significance of his threat.

"Pray understand," he said, softly, "that your fate depends on me, and me alone. In a word, I am master. Un-

derstand it, and accept it. Come! you have plenty of courage, plenty of presence of mind. Try and think that you are standing on a narrow ledge over your beloved Lake of Marishannon, and that only one path lies before you. Take it, and you are safe, secure; refuse, and—" He flung the end of his cigarette in the fireplace with a significant gesture.

There was a pause, as if he wished to give her time to realise his meaning; then he went towards her with outstretched hand. She did not shrink from him, but kept her eyes fixed on vacancy beyond him.

"Come, Nora," he said, in a softer, gentler voice, "be sensible! I know how you feel. You probably hate me at this moment; but don't forget that you forced me to play my trump card. I would have kept it in my hand if you had been gentler with me—if you had said 'Yes' without any fuss. It was your own fault. I'm not a Lord Vernon, or any of the other men, who fall in love with you, and take their 'No' like a beaten spaniel. There is nothing of the spaniel about me. When I want a thing, I want it badly, and I get it; by fair means if I can, by the other means if I can't. I want *you*."

She let her eyes rest on his face for a moment, then they wandered away again, and she sighed, as if well-nigh exhausted by the agony she was enduring.

"Come with me, as I propose. Let me make you happy. I love you, my dear, and I know that I can teach you a happiness of which you cannot even guess. You shall leave the stage forever, if you like. I shall be rich—this business I am going on will make me that; you shall queen it out there, or"—he paused—"or you shall come back after a time," "when I am tired of you," he thought, with a barely suppressed smile—"and ruffle it as of old. Why should you hesitate? There is no other course open to you, save that one, which you will not, dare not, take."

"Why not?" she asked, in a dry voice.

He laughed softly.

"Because you are too proud," he said. "What! Fall—be hurled—from so lofty a pedestal! To lie in the mire and mud—the laughing-stock, the scorn, of all who admired and worshipped you! Not you?"

She sank on to the couch, and sat with clasped hands, her head bent; and he went and stood beside her, and looked down at her.

"Forgive me, Nora! Don't bear ill-will! If I know you, and myself, you will have forgotten all this—this painful

scene, long before we have reached the other side of the world. All is fair in love, you know. And do you think the other men who were so hard hit by you wouldn't have done what I have done! Trust them!" He laughed meaningly. "I know men, and I know women. You are the sort of woman who has to be won at the sword's point; and so I used it. Forgive and forget the means, Nora, and—yield! You will come with me, will you not?"

He expected her still to refuse—to refuse with scorn and contempt, and was prepared for further arguments, persuasions, and threats; but Nora sat silent, and it seemed to him as if she were already considering. He sat down beside her, and took her hand. She shuddered, and withdrew it, but did not rise.

"I start—*we* start—in three or four days," he said, quietly, and with a cool assurance, as if he were confident of his power and the victory it would win him. "Only two men know that I am going; I do not even know the destination myself; this business is a delicate one, and requires secrecy and caution. I have already made arrangements for you to accompany me—"

She did not start, but her eyes dilated.

"You will join me just before the vessel sails. I will come, or send you word of the day and hour. Don't worry about taking too many things; and those you intend to take, pack, and send down to the agents. I will give you the address. Are you listening, my dear?" he broke off to ask.

"I am listening," she said, in a strange voice.

"That's right; we must not make a blunder. As to the Duke's, you can send a line on the day we sail, saying you are indisposed." He laughed cynically. "They are used to that kind of message, and will be prepared for an elopement or disappearance. By-the-way, you had better draw your salary—or, you might get as big an advance as you can." The blood slowly mounted to her face, and as slowly fell again. "It is as well to spoil the Egyptians, you know; and they can afford it."

Nora said nothing. No fresh phase of the man's villainy could surprise or move her.

"We will have a glorious time of it, dearest!" he went on. "You will be delighted with the change, the novelty, and—Ah, Nora, I must try and teach you what love means!" His voice was musical as he murmured the words; and Nora, as she heard them, felt as the bird feels when the serpent hisses softly. But she was past shuddering—a kind of stupor was falling upon her.

"I will go now," he said, rising. "You see, I don't ask for your decision; I know what it will be." He smiled as he bent over her. "You will think it over to-night, and when I see you, or send you word, you will just say this, 'I am going!' Or you will write it to my address." He tore a leaf from his pocket-book, and let it fall gently on her lap. "Just, 'I am going.' Good-night, Nora; I will not ask you for a kiss—you are upset to-night, and no wonder! Think of me as kindly as you can. Remember, it was at the sword's point only I could win you! I throw the sword away now; this hand is no longer steel, but softer than velvet!" He took her hand, and held it for a moment; then he raised it to his lips. It fell to her side as he released it, like lead. He regarded her curiously for a moment, then went to the door. There he paused, and looked back at her with a smile.

"Good-night, my dear Nora!" he murmured. "Be sensible!"

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## CHAPTER XXXII

As his footsteps died away, Nora went to the window and opened it, and, leaning against the side, drew long and painful breaths, like one gasping after threatened suffocation.

It was all over! At that moment she remembered the parting scene with Denis. She had said to him that her father would stand as a barrier between them, that there might be some stain on his name, which, though all else were equal, would render her unworthy to be his wife; but she had never suspected the truth—for she felt that Foyle had spoken truly. She had forgotten the mystery enshrouding her parentage. She had only thought of rising nearer to Denis. And she had risen. There would have been no disgrace in his marrying "Olive Merton," to whom Lord Vernon, the son of a duke, had offered his hand. But Nora Fawcett—the name sounded hateful, shameful, loathsome in her ears—the daughter of a convict! Yes, it was all over.

She leant against the window, with closed eyes and writhing hands. Surely the cruellest Fate that had ever befallen woman had come to her lot! An hour ago she was all that Foyle had painted with such devilish eloquence—famous, honoured, loved. And now! She uttered a faint cry, and dropped to the floor, her face hidden in her shaking hands, in utter prostration.

But Nora was Nora still; one does not kill the courage of a brave woman, even when the dagger is as sharp and as pois-

oned as that which Foyle had used. What should she do? Not yield! She almost laughed—wildly, hysterically—at the mere thought of yielding. She rose after a time, and began to pace the room. Better disgrace, shame, death itself, than that. No; there was only one course open to her. She must act as if she were indeed dead; she must give up all that she had won—everything; her profession, fame, friendships—and fly. For such as she was—for one marked with so indelible a stain—there was no place in the world of honour and good name. As she had come to London—nameless, friendless, unknown—so she must leave it.

The decision was almost instantaneous; but it hurt none the less. To give up everything, to become a wanderer on the earth, not as one who hopes, but carrying a burden of despair which could only grow heavier with each succeeding day. It was hard, hard and bitter; but there was nothing else for her. She tried to form some plans, but she felt too confused, too crushed, to make any; and at last she dragged herself to bed, to lie awake, and palpitating, with the nameless horror of Foyle's presence and voice haunting her like some evil spirit.

In the morning, Dora, looking up from the breakfast-table, was struck, as Nora entered, by the change in her.

"My goodness! Olive, dear, what is the matter?" she exclaimed.

"Do I look so ill?" asked Nora, with a wan smile. "I feel ill."

"You must go to bed at once, and let me send for a doctor!" said Dora, trying to hide her alarm.

But Nora shook her head.

"But you must! You look to me as if—as if you were sickening for something. And all so suddenly, too! I will go down to the Duke's and tell them you cannot play."

"I shall be all right by to-night," said Nora. "We are always all right when the time comes for us to go on, you know. I think I am a—a little tired, and want rest."

But she would not go to bed. She had had enough of the torture of lying still with Spencer Foyle's voice ringing in her ears. She went out, and, almost mechanically, she wandered on to the Embankment where Dora had found her. The day was cold—bitterly cold—but she felt burning hot, and as if her blood had dried up. How long would it be before she was wandering her once more, once more hopeless and friendless, staggering under her burden of shame?

She was back in time to dress for the theatre, and was



driven down, as usual. She hoped to reach her dressing-room unnoticed, and cover the pallor of her face with the friendly mask of powder and paint; but the young girl who was her understudy was standing near the door, and exclaimed, sympathetically, at sight of her:

"Oh, Miss Merton! Are you ill?" she said.

Olive smiled, and drew her into the room.

"I am not very well," she said.

"You look dreadfully ill!" said the girl.

And she was so attached to Olive that it did not occur to her that Olive's extremity would be her, the understudy's, opportunity, until Nora said, quietly and pleasantly:

"I will play to-night; but I may not be able to do so-morrow—"

"Oh! I hope—"

Nora looked at her gently.

"I know you do," she said. "But, all the same, you must be prepared. You will remember the little things I have told you—?"

"—Yes—yes! But, dear Miss Merton—"

"—And you know where to find the costume. See, I will give you the key to-night before I go; and you will use this room, and all my things—"

The girl looked at her almost reproachfully.

"I wish you would not talk like that! It is as if—as if you were going to die!"

"I wish I were!" thought poor Nora. But she smiled, and said:

"I don't think I am going to die. But it is as well that you should be prepared for my being unable to play. Say nothing to any one, dear, but come down early to-morrow, and go over your part to-night. There! I'm low-spirited, you see."

It was said afterwards that Olive Merton had never played better than she played that evening. There were plenty of tears, and more than the usual cheering, as she was called twice before the curtain, at the end of her great scene. She stood downcast, as usual, under the storm of applause; but for one moment she raised her eyes, and seemed to sweep the house. And there were some, wise after the event, who declared that there was "Farewell" in the glance.

She went back to her room, and slowly changed her costume for her own dress, and having given the key of her wardrobe to the understudy—who took it with a mixture of eagerness and reluctance—she was leaving the theatre, when Sedley came up to her.

He, too, was struck by the change in her appearance.

"Are you tired to-night, Miss Merton?" he asked.

"Yes," said Nora, simply.

"I'm sorry!" he said. "You look fagged. That scene takes it out of you, doesn't it? Yes, I'm sorry, for I was going to ask you to give me half an hour this evening. I wanted you to come and have some supper with me at one of the restaurants. But I suppose you wouldn't have come, anyhow; you've got some swell party on, of course?"

Nora had an invitation to a reception, "swell" enough in all conscience; but, of course, she had given up any intention of going. Something prompted her to accept Talbot Sedley's offer. Perhaps the impulse was born of the desire to get away from herself and her misery, even for a short time. She did not know—ah! why is it we never know?—that the hand of Chance—the long arm of Coincidence—was beckoning her.

"I will go with you," she said, as simply as before.

"Come on then!" he responded, marching by her side.

"Hadm't you better get your hat?" she said, with the ghost of a smile.

"Oh—ah, yes—I forgot—thanks!" he said.

He got the harmless but necessary hat, and was calling a cab; but Nora stopped him.

"Let us walk," she said. She felt as if she could not sit still in a cab.

They went to a quiet restaurant in the neighbourhood—one of those places frequented by the artist and journalist—a place in which one can talk as well as eat, and Talbot Sedley carefully ordered the supper. But his care was thrown away, for Nora could only make a pretence of eating.

Sedley scarcely noticed her want of appetite; he was so absorbed in the business which he had in hand.

"Look here," he said, leaning his elbow on the table and looking at her, "I want your advice about my new play."

Nora stared and smiled, and, in his brusque way, he made haste to add:

"Oh, no! not about the construction, or anything of that kind; but upon a matter of—well, yes—taste and conscience."

Nora leant back and smiled again.

"You are a better judge—"

"—Oh, no, I am not," he cut in. "I'm a man; and a man isn't in it in a question of taste or conscience with a woman. And you are the kind of woman whose taste and conscience a fellow can sweer by—that's why I ask you. See?"

"I am very much flattered," said Nora. "A compliment from Mr. Sedley—!"

"Yes; I know I'm a bear and a boor; but, all the same, I set a high value upon your good opinion and your judgment. Look here, Miss Merton, is a man, a playwright, justified in using an incident, a series of incidents in real life, things that have happened to a friend, for a story or a play?"

Nora tried to concentrate her attention on what he was saying; but it was hard work. The daughter of a convict! Good-bye, Denis, forever—forever—forever! rang in her heart like a knell.

"I don't know," she said, rather wearily. "It all depends on what they were."

"Nothing discreditable to the friend to whom the thing happened, or, of course, I shouldn't use them," said Sedley. "I'll tell you. May I smoke? Can't think, talk, without a pip. Thanks."

He lit his well-seasoned briar and stared at her, beyond her, thoughtfully for a moment; then he started:

"Here you are: a young fellow I know—one of the best that's made, by the way—a good-looking boy with a heart of gold, one of those youngsters that keep a man's faith in humanity alive, don't you know—gets into a scrape down in the country. Don't know what kind of scrape it was, so I shall invent one. Sure to have been about a woman, by-the-bye!"

Nora smiled.

"Poor Woman! What sins are committed in thy name!" she murmured.

"Good! I'll use that some day, if you'll allow me! What a clever girl you are, Miss Merton! Well, he gets into a scrape, and his uncle, with whom he lives, and whose heir he is, cuts up rough, and turns him out of doors. Scene I."

Nora nodded.

"—Young fellow came to London to see me. We had been great pals, and he hoped that I should be able to help him to something to do. But what the deuce can you find for a young swell who has been brought up—well, like a swell! He'd tried a profession, and cut it; and I couldn't help him to anything else, though I tried my hardest. For I was fond of him; and I am still, by George! Now—and here's where the interest thickens—one night a man turns up, a queer sort of customer, who joins us at supper—the lad and me, you know—and in the course of conversation, lugs out a packet of opals. Opals! Says that he has got a mine of them

out in Australia somewhere, and actually proposes that the youngster should go out with him as a partner, share and share alike."

Nora grew faintly interested.

"It sounds like a novel or a play," she said.

"Of course! that's why I want it!" retorted Sedley. "But you wait! Well, I try and throw cold water on the scheme. I suggest that the youngster will be murdered—all sorts of things; but he's full of pluck and enterprise, and he laughs me to scorn—and he accepts."

"Did he go? This is a real story?" asked Nora.

"Real, actual, true! He went. Before they went, I made them sign an agreement, a fair and square thing, and I made him promise that he would write to me if trouble ensued, in fact, write to me in any case, if he could. For I was fond of him, as I have said.

"And has he written?"

"Nary line," said Sedley, rather sadly; "and I'm anxious—very anxious! But there's the story. Now, can I make it into a play without offending against good taste, and all that? Speak, oh, sybil!"

But Nora did not speak. She could not decide.

"You see what I could do with it? And the things I could do with it makes me a little, no, a great deal, uneasy; for they might have played him false, or some fellows over there might have attacked them, and my lad have been done to death; or, here, again, the man he went with may have told some one over here why they were going, and that some one may have been a villain, and followed them—as I should make them do in the play, see? And, in fact, I see all sorts of trouble and danger before poor Denis."

Nora started, and her face went white as she stared at him.

"What name did you say?" she asked, breathlessly.

Talbot Sedley bit his lips.

"Bother! I did not mean to tell you his name! But it's out now; and, after all, I don't know that it matters. I can trust *you*, Miss Merton. My young friend's name is Denis Dennison, and he is the nephew of Lord Dennison, of Marishannon in Ireland."

Nora was an actress, be it remembered, and so had the pull over the ordinary woman, who would certainly at this juncture have screamed or given herself away by some expression of her amazement and emotion. She was an actress, and so she was able to suppress all signs of the storm which had sprung up within her bosom, and to regard Talbot Sedley with

apparently calm and polite interest. He, good man, being absorbed in the story of his young friend, and the possible plot of his play, was, like your author all the world over, quite unobservant of the lovely face opposite him.

"Marishannon! It's a pretty name," said Nora; she wondered how she *could* speak so calmly and quietly. "And you do not know why Mr. Dennison quarrelled with his uncle?"

Sedley shook his head.

"No; both of them being Irish, and the young cub as proud and hot-tempered as they make 'em, it would not take much to set the pair by the ears."

Nora drew a breath of relief. Denis had not told of their love; not even to this friend of his!

"And where is it Mr. Dennison has gone?" she asked.

"What"—her heart beat fast—"is the name of the place?"

"Ah; that's what I don't know!" said Sedley, rather gravely. "Of course, the man who took him wouldn't tell me or any one. When you have an opal mine in your back garden, you naturally keep the particular spot quiet, lest other men should climb over the walls. Denis himself did not know where it was."

"He trusted this man?" said Nora, crumbling a piece of bread under her taper fingers, and apparently quite interested in the operation.

"Entirely. It was that or not going."

"How do you know the sort of man he was? I suppose you had good references with him?"

Sedley shook his head.

"No; I asked— Oh! I played the 'business man' for all it was worth; but the man refused all information about himself, and any kind of references. I fancy there might have been something shady in his past—"

"And you let Den—your friend go with him, alone, to a wild country—!"

Sedley cut in, with a grim smile:

"It wasn't a question of 'letting,' " he said. "The boy was resolved to go; and—ah, well, you don't know him, or you'd understand that all the talking in the world wouldn't turn him. And I *did* talk. I cackled enough to jaw the hind leg off a donkey; but it was all of no use: he meant going, and—he goed."

"Have you no idea what part of Australia they went to?" she asked.

Sedley smiled. "You're quite interested!" he remarked. "That augurs well for the play—if I do it!"

The colour rose to her face for a moment, and her eyes became downcast.

"Yes, I am interested," she said. "It is a strange story."

"Isn't it? The only clue I have to their whereabouts is a remark dropped by Culmer—"

"The man who owned the mine?"

He nodded.

"Yes—that it was on the road to or from Ballarat."

Nora murmured the word after him.

"And you have not heard?"

"No; of course there is plenty of time. And—and yet I am anxious. You see, when I was thinking out the plot, founded on this true incident, I began to see what *might* actually happen; and every time I think of Denis—thank God I'm a busy man, and can't afford to think of my own affairs, or my friend's, very often!—I get an uncomfortable feeling where my heart is supposed to be: though Miss Yorke says I have none."

Nora smiled at him so sweetly that the place where Sedley's heart ought to be grew warm.

"What a lovely creature it is!" he thought. "No wonder they all fall in love with her!"

Then, aloud, he went on:

"Of course, it may turn out all right, and the lad may come back rolling in money, stuck all over with opals like a heathen idol, and will laugh my fear to scorn, in the pleasant way he has, or—" He paused. "You see, it would be so easy for some scoundrel, if he knew what I and you know, to follow them and play the mischief."

Nora's face paled—it had been rather flushed—and she caught her breath.

"You—you don't suspect any one?" she asked, as calmly as she could.

"No; oh, no! In my plot—I mean the plot of my play—I've made a gentlemanly villain discover their secret and follow them."

He paused a second or two, and looked at her curiously and apologetically. "I wonder whether you will be offended if I tell you who it is I have taken as a model for my villain?"

Nora smiled and shook her head.

"Is it a friend of mine?" she asked.

"Well, yes, it is; that is, he is an acquaintance. I believe you have seen a great deal of him lately."

"Who is it?" she asked.

"Mr. Spencer Foyle," said Sedley, innocently.

Nora leant back; the decorations on the wall opposite her danced and jumbled together; she felt a sudden faintness.

"I think I should like a glass of wine—if I may have it," she said, as distinctly as she could. She had refused it through the supper.

Sedley signed to the waiter; champagne was brought, and Nora drank some. Spencer Foyle! Was it all coincidence, or a providential warning?

"I have no objection to—your taking Mr. Foyle for the model of your villain," she said. "And—and he is no friend of mine. I know him!"

There was a significance in the words which, of course, Sedley did not see.

"I'm glad to hear that!" he said, with satisfaction and relief. "To tell you the truth, that gentleman, though he moves in 'the best society,' doesn't bear the best of characters."

"You know something against him?" said Nora.

Sedley shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, a little—yes," he said. "The man's an adventurer, and not over-scrupulous—your adventurer rarely is. Scruples don't pay. He'd make a splendid villain, with that face of his, and that cold-blooded, cynical smile."

"Yes," said Nora; and the little word dropped like lead from her lips.

"And now, tell me your opinion—deliver your judgment!" said Sedley.

Nora leant her head on her hand and seemed to ponder.

"You do not want your play yet?" she said.

"Oh, no; thanks to you and Miss Yorke, the present one is in for a run."

"Well, then, I will tell you, write to you, after I have considered," she said.

"Right!" said Sedley, in his abrupt fashion. "I rely on you. What you say, shall be, oh, king—I mean, queen!"

Nora reached for her sealskin jacket.

"Mr. Sedley, I—I want to thank you," she said. He started: he thought she meant for the supper; "for all your goodness and kindness to me. But for you I should never have had my chance, never have succeeded. If—if—at any time you are inclined to think me ungrateful—don't do so! My heart is full of gratitude, and will be as long as I live—"

"Oh, stop!" he said, with all a strong man's shyness. "The boot's on the other leg—mine, I mean. It's I who have to thank you. And I shall have to thank you still more

when you make a success of the new play—if you decide that it's to be written, by-the-way. Don't speak of gratitude, or I shall have to grovel at your feet, and that would upset the waiters! Why—oh, I say, you're not going to cry?" he broke off, in horror and alarm; for the lovely eyes had suddenly filled with tears.

"No, no!" she said; and she drew her hand across her eyes swiftly, and forced a smile. "Only—only I want you to remember that I was grateful, and that, whatever happens, I was not insensible of your kindness. I'll go now. I've enjoyed my supper; and—and—your story interested me very much."

"Well, I won't keep you," he said, eyeing her rather anxiously. "You look tired again, now; and I think you ought to be in bed. I'm a selfish pig to have kept you so late—and worried you all the time, too!"

He called a hansom for her, and put her in—with a gentleness unusual with Mr. Talbot Sedley—and Nora drove home.

The maid who opened the door said: "A gentleman has been here to see you, miss, and he left a note. It is upstairs, on the small table."

Nora went upstairs, and found the letter. It was from Spencer Foyle.

"MY DEAREST,—I hoped to find you in, and am disappointed. We start sooner than I expected. The vessel—the 'Ocean Star'—sails on Saturday from Liverpool. Three o'clock. I have your ticket. Be there well in time, and go on board, and straight to the ladies' cabin. Of course, I do not wish you to be seen until we have started. I will come to you immediately the tug has left us. You will, of course, send your luggage by rail. Direct it to me, for the 'Ocean Star.' I give you all these details, because I may not find time to see you to-morrow. I have a great deal of business to get through. Send me the word I am dying to get: 'I am going!'"

Yours till death,

"SPENCER FOYLE."

Holding this charming note by the extreme tips of her fingers—as if it were poisonous—Nora thought hard. Women are quick to jump at conclusions, especially when they are spurred by their feelings. Spencer Foyle knew Denis: he was a man of bad character: she knew him to be an unscrupulous villain: he was going to Australia. What more probable than that he should have discovered the secret of the opals, and be on the track of Denis?



A man, especially a business man, would have hesitated at such a conclusion. But Nora was a woman—and the man in danger was her sweetheart. And Foyle was a villain! She had fought for Denis once; she—her eyes blazed, and the blood rushed to her face—she would fight for him again.

All the lassitude which had oppressed her for the last two months fell from her like a garment; and she stood upright, determined, strong, and fearless.

She found the *Times*, and saw that the "Ocean Star" was advertised to sail for Melbourne. It was true, then, that Foyle was going to Australia; she would not have taken his word uncorroborated. She flung aside her hat and jacket, went upstairs, packed a box with some discarded clothes, and addressed it as he had directed.

Then she took out all her money—every penny of it—and every article of jewellery, and went over the latter appraisingly. There was more money than she had expected, and there was a sum at the bank which she could draw on in the morning. The jewels she would keep as something to fall back upon.

Then she went into Dora's room and gently woke her.

"Don't be frightened, dear!" she whispered, as Dora started up, thrusting the hair from her face and staring at her. "I've something to tell you. Something important."

"Oh! what is it? It's all very well to say 'don't be frightened!' and you pale as death, and looking like a ghost! Is it good news? I was dreaming that they'd offered me another engagement at the Empress: the play comes off to-morrow night, you know. Is it an engagement?"

"Yes," said Nora; "an engagement abroad." And she forced a smile. "Dora, dear, I am obliged to go to Australia—suddenly, without any one knowing. It is not to act—it is a private business, of which I cannot tell even you. Will you trust me, and come with me? I must go alone if you do not."

Dora gazed at her, open-eyed and open-mouthed, and prepared to get out of bed. But Nora held her. "No, do not get up. There is no need. Will you come with me, Dora? I am going into wild places, into danger, perhaps—I will not deceive you. And I cannot tell how long I may be away. But I must go—I *must*! I have enough money, and if at any time you wish to leave me, I will see that you come home—"

"What are you talking about?" Dora broke in, indignantly. "Who wants to leave you? Of course I'll come! You know that well enough. I couldn't refuse!" she added, rather

pathetically. "But—oh, Lor', Olive!—to Australia! And all of a sudden! It—it sounds like a dream."

"Try and think it is," said Nora, quietly. "For not a word must be said, a hint given. We have to leave England like—yes, like fugitives. Think, dear, before you decide. I'll give you till to-morrow morning—"

"Oh! what's the use?" said Dora. "I've got to go with you, you know that! But of all the strange and mysterious things I ever heard of—! But I've got to go. There's no leaving you, Olive! You've got hold of me by the heart-strings, and that's a fact!"

"Very well, then," cried Nora. "Now go to sleep again, and I'll tell you all our plans in the morning."

Spencer Foyle came round the next day. But Nora had told the maid to say that her mistress was out, and hand him a note. And Nora saw him go away from the house. He walked as listlessly and languidly as usual. But Nora saw, or fancied she saw, the glitter of satisfaction in his eyes.

For the envelope the maid had given him contained a sheet of paper, across which Nora had written:

"I am going!"

Sharp on time, the deck of the "Ocean Star" was cleared of all but the passengers and crew, and the tug, loaded with those who had come to see their friends off, steamed and puffed towards the shore. There was the usual shouting of "Good-bye! God bless you!" and the usual shedding of tears and waving of handkerchiefs; and amidst these valedictory tokens, the huge vessel moved away on its voyage. Spencer Foyle and Mr. Tusker stood leaning against the deck-rail, watching the departing launch.

"Started at last!" cried Tusker. "What a devil of a fuss people make on these occasions, don't they, Mr. Foyle? I suppose we'd better go and drink success to our enterprise?"

Foyle nodded.

"Yes," he said, quietly, as he lit a cigarette. "You go and order the wine, and I'll join you in the smoking-room."

As soon as Tusker had disappeared, Foyle flung his cigarette overboard, and went down towards the ladies' cabin.

There was a smile on his face, a smile of triumph, of anticipation. He had seen the box sent by Nora; he felt quite assured that she herself was on board. His beautiful wild Irish girl! His! He met the stewardess at the door.

"Is Mrs. Foyle in the saloon or her cabin?" he asked, pleasantly.

"Mrs. Foyle, sir!"

She went to the little room, and consulted a list of her lady passengers.

"There is no one by that name, sir," she said.

Foyle smiled to himself. She had not ventured, she had been ashamed, to take his name.

"All right," he said. "She is in the cabin. The lady is my wife. I'll wait for her."

He stood at the doorway, his hands in his jacket pocket; a handsome, beautifully-dressed man, with a charming, self-satisfied smile playing about his lips.

The ladies came out of their state-rooms, and down the stairs to the saloon—they always write letters the moment the vessel starts—and Foyle looked in, expecting to see the face with which he was more than half in love; but it was not there.

"See the lady, sir?" asked the stewardess.

"No," he said, slowly.

"Then she must be on deck," she said. "There's no one in their cabin now; they're all out."

Foyle went up to the deck. Two ladies were standing talking together. Neither of them was Nora. The blood ebbed slowly from his face. He went down again.

"Look in all the cabins," he said, to the surprised stewardess.

She did so.

"No, sir!"

He went up again, and searched the deck. And then, suddenly, like a flash, he saw that she had foiled him.

For once in his life Mr. Spencer Foyle lost his equilibrium. His face went livid, a torrent of oaths, too awful for hinting at, poured from his lips; and as Tusker came up to him, he clutched him by the arm.

"Stop—stop the damned ship!" he hissed. "I'll give them any sum! I must, I *will* have it stopped! The captain—where is he? Tell them, *any* sum—"

"Heavens, man, are you mad? What has happened?" demanded Tusker, staring at him.

Foyle ran, actually ran, to the side of the vessel; and Tusker, alarmed by his manner and voice, and, more than all, by his face, sprang after him, and seized him by both arms.

"Let me go, curse you!" snarled Foyle.

"Go! Where?" demanded Tusker. "Man, do you want to commit suicide? 'Stop the ship!' You know it can't be done—not for a million of money! You must be mad!"

Foyle's hand went to his throat, as if he were choking, and his lips turned livid. Then, suddenly, he seemed to regain control of himself, and with a fearful oath, said:

"Yes, I was mad. Let me go. I'm all right now. Where's that wine? Bring it, for God's sake, or I shall choke!" And as Tusker hurried away, the half-demented man raised his fist, and shook it towards the receding shore, and cursed Nora with a fluency simply appalling. But when Tusker came back with the wine, Foyle was almost calm again, though his hand shook as he took the glass.

"I—I wonder how soon we can send a letter home?" he said, hoarsely. "I—I want to send something to the papers. Oh, don't stare. I've—I've had a little surprise, and—and it's upset me. That's all!"

\* \* \* \* \*

That evening Johnson came rushing to meet Sedley as he entered the theatre.

"Miss Merton's indisposed!" he said, gravely. "Walford's just gone on to tell them. Only heard it an hour ago!"

Sedley stood still.

"She looked ill the other night," he said, sadly. "Look here. I'll take a cab and run round to her place, and enquire."

"I was just going!"

"No; I'll go," said Sedley.

The maid opened the door.

"Miss Merton's left, sir," she said.

"Left! What—what do you mean?"

"She's gone, sir. Went this morning. I think she's gone abroad."

Sedley gasped.

"There's a note for you, sir—if you're Mr. Sedley?"

Sedley tore it open.

It ran thus:

"Do not think worse of me than you can help. You promised not to deem me ungrateful, whatever happened. When you get this, I shall be on my way across the ocean. *I had to go!*

OLIVE MERTON."

### CHAPTER XXXIII.

ONE evening, Denis straightened his back, leant on his pick, and looked up at the sky reluctantly. Reluctantly, because the light was rapidly going, and his day's work had drawn to

a close. You don't go in for "eight hours" when you are gold or opal-digging, for the longer you can work the better you are pleased.

He had been working, with only few and brief intervals, since sunrise, and yet he was scarcely tired. For one thing, he had gained in strength in a wonderful degree; constant exercise in an air as light as a woman's fancy, and as exhilarating as champagne, with regular meals of plain and wholesome food, had transformed, or, rather, developed, the youth to glorious manhood.

Denis was tanned a golden brown; he was as lean as a greyhound and as muscular as a blacksmith; his eyes were bright and sparkling, and his spirits as high as the proverbial sand-boy's. He ate tremendously, and drank nothing but water—and tea—and slept like the Seven Sleepers rolled into one; in a word, he was growing rich by the healthy work of his own hands; and there is nothing—let novelists and philosophers say what they will—which is more likely to make a man happy.

Only one thing Denis wanted, and that was a dark-haired girl named Nora Neil.

He straightened his back, threw back his head, and sighed—with the satisfaction of the man who has done an honest day's work—and methodically cleaned his pick, which shone like silver from the constant friction with the rough roots and stone. Then he shouldered it, and strode—with what a firm step and lithe, swinging gait!—towards the enclosure, where the wagon which spelt "Home" stood.

Culmer was bending over the steaming kettle, which contained the evening meal and was giving out an exasperatingly savoury odour.

"Finished for the day, lad?" he said, looking at the stalwart figure and handsome face, with a gravely affectionate smile.

"Yes; the light's given out," said Denis, with half a sigh. "I'd no idea it was so late!" Culmer smiled to himself as Denis slipped off his wet shirt—wet with perspiration—and went out for a good wash at the rill which raced over the rocks hard at hand. He, Culmer, knew the feeling, the keen desire to work, work on; the resentment against the approach of night when no man can work. Denis came back, his face shining, his appetite sharpened by the water, and threw himself down beside the fire.

"I struck a fresh vein to-day," he said. "Do you notice that they run in kind of streaks, Culmer?"

Culmer nodded.

"Yes; action of fire," he said, laconically. "Some thousands or millions of years ago this hill was a blazing volcano. At least, that's how I take it, and these stones are the bits of lava or small pebbles burnt into opals. Is that right, Denis?"

Denis laughed shortly.

"Haven't the least notion," he said. "I'm as ignorant as a mule about most things—geology, mineralogy, most of all. I'll look it up when we get home," he added.

Culmer glanced at him as he handed him a plate of steaming stew—in quantity sufficient for three London men.

"Speakin' of home, lad," he said, in his quiet way, "I'm thinkin' that we'd better be considerin' about makin' back tracks."

Denis's face flushed, and his eyes glowed; then he looked reluctantly towards the opal ground.

"And leave all that?" he said, in a low voice.

"We must leave it some time, Mr. Denis; and it would be better to leave it before the winter sets in. Besides, they won't run away; we can come back."

"Yes; we could," said Denis; "but who knows whether we should be able to?"

Culmer nodded.

"That's true. But have you any notion of how much we've got?"

Denis shook his head.

"I haven't looked at the box lately," he replied, reddening shyly. "I feel like a school-boy who is 'collecting things' and putting off the counting-up until he has got a real heap."

"I know," said Culmer, laconically. "I've felt like that myself. I fancy we must have a good haul. The box was nearly full when I put the last lot in. A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, and it isn't the cute thing to carry all your eggs in one basket."

Denis nodded. "You mean—?"

"That we've got the stones quietly and uninterrupted like, and they're safe and sound up to now; but I'd like to see 'em turned into coin, and to feel that that coin was safely banked. What do you say to a run to Melbourne—or to England—with the swag, Mr. Denis?"

Denis's eyes glowed again. To England! And to Ireland—to Nora!

"We'll have a count-up after supper," said Culmer, "and talk the matter over. It shall be just as you like, Mr. Denis. I'm willing to stop on or to go."

"You're always unselfish and good-natured, Culmer!" said Denis, gratefully. He was silent for a moment or two afterwards; then he said: "Let us stop one day more. I've got into a heap of them just by that big rock, and I should like to clear it out; to-morrow night we'll have a grand inspection—a counting of treasure!" He laughed happily. "And then, Hol for old England!"

"'For England, Home, and Beauty!'" said Culmer.

No more was said that night. Culmer went the rounds, as he called it, and they turned in, and slept as men who have earned their opals by the sweat of their brow and the strain of every muscle can sleep.

"Only one day more!" Denis said to himself, as he went to work the next morning after breakfast; and that day he worked with an earnestness and ardour which caused Culmer to give him a word of warning.

"Don't overdo it, lad," he said, in his gruff way. "We've got a long journey before us—a long and a hard one."

"I know," said Denis. "But I feel as if every minute as it passes was robbing me of so much money." He laughed rather shamefacedly, and paused to wipe the sweat from his face, and glance round. "I shall be sorry to go, Culmer," he said. "Not only because of these"—and he touched an opal with his foot—"but because I've got fond of the place."

Culmer nodded. "Not a bad place; a man might be in many a worse," he remarked.

"It's beautiful, lovely—I know only one place on earth to beat it," said Denis, falling to work again.

"And where may that be?" asked Culmer.

Denis shovelled out a heap of dirt before replying.

"Oh, in Ireland. An out-of-the-way spot. You wouldn't know it, but it's more beautiful—in my eyes, at least—than this, and that's saying a lot!"

"In Ireland!" commented Culmer, musingly; but he said no more, and they worked on in the silence which is not silence when two men have lived alone together for months and have grown to understand each other.

"I'm glad we stayed another day," said Denis, as they walked back to the wagon, walking with slow, stiff steps. "I've got more to-day than I've found for the last four."

"I've done fairly well, too," said Culmer. "We'll count up when we turn in."

They hurried over their supper, and Denis climbed into the wagon and lit a lantern. Culmer followed him with the bag which contained the day's harvest.

"Better close the flap," he said.

Denis laughed as he did so.

"Not much fear of onlookers," he said, lightly.

"It's always best to be careful," remarked Culmer. "By-the-way, you went to the look-out at midday, Mr. Denis?"

Denis looked up rather contritely. They took it in turns to go to their place of watching, and this was his day for the duty.

"No, I didn't," he said, reluctantly. "To tell you the truth, I was so absorbed in the work—it was the last day, you know!—I forgot it. I'm very sorry, Culmer. Look here, I'll go now."

"No, no," said Culmer. "I don't suppose any one has turned up in the ranch below; and, if they have, you wouldn't be able to see 'em in the dark."

"See their fire, perhaps," suggested Denis, and he began to crawl towards the opening; but Culmer laid a hand upon his arm.

"You're tired; I'll go," he said.

"No, I'm dashed if you shall!" said Denis, emphatically.

"You're just as tired as I am; and it's my duty, old man."

"Then we'll neither of us go," said Culmer. "It's all right, I daresay. Sit down, lad. Here's the 'bacca, and here's the box."

As he spoke, he lifted the precious box and placed it between them as they sat Turkish fashion opposite each other; it was heavy, and Culmer had to take both hands, and "lift" at that. Denis had hung the lantern to the roof of the wagon, and its light fell upon their bronzed faces and upon the heap of opals which glittered like things alive, like sparks of fire, as Culmer raised the lid.

Both men gazed at the pile of gems in silence for a moment, then Denis said, in a kind of whisper:

"Turn them out, Culmer! Here, on this coat!" and he spread a coat between them. Culmer carefully turned the box upside down, and the stones massed themselves in a heap, and rolled, sparkling and glittering, like tiny cascades of iridescent water.

Denis laughed from sheer delight.

"What a pile!" he said. "How beautiful they are; apart from their value, eh, Culmer?"

Culmer nodded.

"Yes," he said. "They're worse than gold, as I said. They kind o' fascinate you, and get on your nerves, don't they?"



Denis passed his hand across his brow, and nodded.

"I can understand now the fascination gems have got for come men, and all women," he said.

"Yes," assented Culmer. "Many a murder's been done for less than a hundredth part of these. There's some fine ones amongst 'em, ain't there, Mr. Denis? Look at that, for instance. Fit to go into a royal crown, ain't it?"

"And they are not all opals," said Denis, taking out a handful and sorting out some lighter and more transparent stones.

"No; they're amethysts, I think—I'm not sure. I know as little about gems as you do. That's strange, ain't it? But it's natural enough when you come to think about it. I was afraid to mention the word, in case any one should get an inkling of what I'd got hold of."

Denis nodded.

"This isn't a diamond, is it, Culmer?"

Culmer shook his head.

"Don't think so. Too bright and shiny; diamonds don't shine in the rough, I've always heard. Fancy it's a topaz."

Denis dropped the gem on the heap, and, leaning back, smoked with sybaritic enjoyment.

"A millionaire was once asked what he did with his money," he said, "and he replied that 'he rolled in it'! We could roll in these, eh, Culmer?" And he laughed.

Culmer smiled in his grim fashion.

"Yes, we could. Now, let us see what they're worth at a rough guess. I'll take as a standard what the jeweller cove offered me for those I took to London, Mr. Denis. Just help me sort 'em out into sizes, putting the finest-coloured ones into a heap by themselves."

They began to sort; but every now and then Denis stopped and leant back—his eyes still on the glittering heap, however—to puff at his pipe thoughtfully.

He was thinking what he would do with the half of this wealth. There was Nora first; but there was some one else also of whom he thought—there was his uncle, Lord Larry.

Absence makes the heart grow fonder; and Denis—who was a warm-hearted lad—had long ago forgiven his uncle. You have time to think when you spend months, with only one companion to speak to, in the solitude of an Australian wild, and Denis had long since awakened to the fact that he had behaved—well, not altogether nicely—in that Warner affair at Marishannon. In the heat of his passion he had forgotten what he owed to the man who had been a father to him. H

had had time since to remember that Lord Larry was fond of him; and that, if he had had patience to wait until the old man's passion had cooled down, all would have been well. He had learnt also that he was as fond of Lord Larry as Lord Larry was of him; and he thought, as he stared at the gems:

"Yes, I'll go straight to Nora, and claim her; then I'll go to the dear old man, and say: 'I've come back, sir; forgive me!' and when he's got hold of me by the hand, and nearly wrung it off, and tried to hide the tears in his eyes by laughing and blustering a bit, I'll tell him of my luck, and make him take enough to clear the debt off Marishannon. I won't let out that I've 'struck ile,' as Culmer would say, until I've asked him to forgive me, or, like enough, he'll show me the door again. Dear old man! I know him so well! And then—then I'll marry Nora! Marry Nora!"

The blood rushed to his face, and a smile—a light—flashed in his eyes at the thought.

And at that moment he was startled by a cry which rose from Culmer's lips, and the sight of Culmer flinging his arms and half his body across the gems, as if to protect them.

"Good God! What's the matter?" demanded Denis, gazing at him with amazement.

For Culmer, who was sitting facing the flap of the wagon, was staring before him with protruding eyes, and with white face, in which surprise and terror were depicted.

"What is it?" demanded Denis.

Culmer raised a hand that shook like a leaf, and pointed towards the flap.

"Look! Look!" he whispered, chokingly.

"Where?" said Denis, turning his head and looking over his shoulder. "What's the matter? Why, man, you look as if you'd seen a ghost!"

Culmer did not move, seemed, indeed, incapable of moving, and still pointing the shaking hand.

"There—there was some one there!" he said, hoarsely.

Denis swung round on his haunches, untied the laces of the flap, threw it back, and rolled out.

The night was dark, save for a few stars, and the patch of light from the lantern made the surroundings still darker by contrast. Denis leapt to his feet, and listened. There was not a sound, save the munching of the horse tethered close by. Then he ran forward noiselessly, and stopped and listened again, with his revolver in his hand. Still there was no sound of retreating footsteps, and he went back to the wagon. Culmer was hastily shovelling the gems back into the box.

His hands were trembling, he was shaking all over, his face was white and drawn, and his eyes had a terror-stricken expression in them. It was evident that he was suffering from some shock.

"What is it, old man?" asked Denis.

Culmer paused in his operation of replacing the gems.

"I saw a man at the opening of the flap," he said.

Denis gazed at him incredulously. "I don't—think so!" he said. "I don't think any one was there. I was out in a moment, and must have heard him running away."

Culmer pushed the hair from his forehead— it was wet with sweat.

"Take—take the lantern, and see if there are any footprints," he said, hoarsely.

Denis took down the lantern, and examined the ground at the tail of the wagon. If there had been any strange tracks on the hard ground, Denis had obliterated them by his own footprints.

"There's not a sign, not a trace of any one!" he said, coming back to the wagon. "You stop there! Got your revolver?" Culmer touched it. "I'll look round."

He did so, making as careful search as was possible by the aid of the lantern, and presently Culmer joined him.

"The look-out!" he said. They went to the small clearing and looked down. There was no sign of a fire, nor any light in the ranch below.

"There is no one there," said Denis. "My dear fellow, it must have been sheer fancy on your part. Come back, and let us talk it over." They climbed into the wagon, and Denis produced his flask, and insisted upon Culmer's taking a sip of brandy.

The spirit restored his confidence somewhat, and he made an evident effort to pull himself together.

"Better?" said Denis. "Own up that it was fancy, Culmer!"

Culmer was silent for a moment or two, his eyes downcast, his mouth set tightly. Now and again he glanced at the end of the wagon, and his eyebrows twitched.

"It might have been," he said, as if he had been trying to consider the suggested explanation calmly and critically. "Yes, it might have been; and there's one thing that leads me to think it was. It was a face I knew."

"You knew!" said Denis, with surprise.

Culmer nodded, and cleared his throat as if he found some difficulty in speaking.

"I've never told you my story, Mr. Denis," he said, moodily. "I daresay you guessed, when I refused to give Mr. Sedley an account of myself and any references, that I wasn't up to much—that there was something up agin me. Well"—he drew a long breath and set his teeth hard—"there is!"

"Look here, Culmer," interrupted Denis, "I don't want you to tell me. I don't want you to confide in me because of this little start you've had. I don't care what there is against you; I know that you have proved as honest and honourable a mate as ever a man had, and that's sufficient for me!"

Culmer raised his eyes and looked at the handsome, flushed face for a moment, and there was a suspicion of moisture in his own eyes.

"Thank you, Mr. Denis," he said. "Yes, I've been on the square with you, that's true enough; but I haven't always been on the square. I ain't going to tell you the whole ins and outs of it, and I ain't going to whine about 'bad companions, an' being led astray.' That lay is too mean for me, anyway; though I *was* led astray, and it was through as bad a one as you'd find in any of Her Majesty's jugs."

"Jugs?" said Denis, puzzled.

"Prisons," translated Culmer, laconically. "It was a bad day when I made the acquaintance of the party I'm speaking of. He was one o' them chaps that gets a hold on you, which you can't shake off, try as you will. A quiet, gentlemanly little card, as looked as if he was too straight to rob a hen-roost, an' all the time a perfect devil. A perfect devil! that hits him off, Mr. Denis. One of those determined, cold-blooded wretches that have got the shape of a man and the inside of a demon."

Denis re-lit his pipe and listened, but reluctantly.

"Is it necessary to tell me, Culmer?" he said. He had too great a liking for the man who had proved a true and faithful partner not to shrink from hearing ill of him, and from his own lips.

"I've got to tell you some day or other, Mr. Denis," said Culmer, as if he were forced to continue. "This man planned a—a robbery; one of the daringest, most audacious jobs that 'ud been ever heard of. It was the cheek, the dash of the thing, that took me, and induced me to join him. Well"—he took a long breath, and frowned—"it didn't come off right. We was very nigh murder, and we was convicted—"

"Hold on," said Denis, pale, and rather shaky; "I don't want to hear any more!"

"I'm done, sir," said Culmer, with a sigh. "But the face

I saw there"—he nodded towards the end of the wagon—"was the face of the man who made a criminal and a jail-bird of me. It was the same face, with the shining eyes fixed on the heap o' opals. I remembered them eyes the moment I saw them, and they was raised, and looked into mine with the old devilish, cold-blooded look."

He wiped his mouth with his rough hand, and stared before him, as if he still saw the face.

"Look here, Culmer," said Denis; "what you tell me convinces me my theory is the right one. It was fancy on your part—sheer fancy. You got excited over the stones and the thought of what they were worth, and imagined that you saw a face. The very fact that you thought it was that of the man you have been telling me about proves that it was mere fancy. It is too unlikely that he should be here in this out-of-the-way spot, of whose existence only you and I—as I might almost say—are cognisant. Don't you see? If it had been any other face! But this man's—your old tempter's—the man who led you astray—it would be too improbable a coincidence!"

Culmer looked up moodily.

"Unless it wasn't coincidence at all," he said. "Unless he followed me here. I met him in London. He wanted me to join him in another job; and when I refused, he smiled in the pleasant way he has—pleasant to all seeming, but worse than another man's threat."

Denis was silent for a moment or two.

"You lie down," he said. "You have had a nasty shock, an attack of nerves, Culmer. I'll sit up and watch to-night."

Culmer shook his head.

"Take the box outside and bury it—not in the old place, but a new one."

Denis buried the box and came back. Culmer was more composed; but it was evident that he was thrown off his balance; and after a minute or two, he stretched himself at full length. Denis sat, revolver in hand, listening intently; and Culmer closed his eyes and remained motionless for a time; then he raised himself on his elbow, and, looking past Denis, said, in a low voice:

"Of course, what I've told you ends it up atween you and me, Mr. Denis. Fortunately, we shall be partin' soon. You'll put up with me till we get to Melbourne—"

"Shut up, and don't be a chuckle-headed idiot!" said Denis, with a lump in his throat. "I don't care a damn what you've been in the past. It's enough for me that you

have acted straight and square by me; aye, as straight and fair as the most honourable man could have acted. From to-night I've forgotten all you've said. Now go to sleep, like a sensible chap, and to-morrow we'll cut the place, as we agreed, or it will get on my nerves as it has done on yours. Shut up, Culmer!"

The rough man closed his eyes, and said no more; but for some minutes his large chest heaved as if he were shaken by some emotion against which he was fighting with all his strength.

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#### CHAPTER XXXIV.

A FEW minutes after Denis had returned to the wagon, a man who had been lying flat in the undergrowth, so near to where Denis had been standing that if he had moved a little to the right he must have trodden upon him, raised himself on his hands and knees, and crawled slowly with painful caution down the hill. When he reached the shelter of the pines and the darkness of their shadow, he rose to his feet, and went on as rapidly as he could until he reached a wagon laagered near the stream. A figure was bending over a fire, and it sprang to its feet with surprise as the first man dashed at the flames and covered them with his coat.

"Why the devil did you do that, Tusker?" demanded Foyle, as he set down the pot he had been stirring and gazed in amazement at Tusker, who, seemingly not content with dousing the fire, snatched up the lantern and extinguished it.

But just before the light went out, Foyle had time to see that Tusker's face and manner were indicative of wild excitement and intense emotion, and that the sweat stood in large drops on his brow.

"What, in Heaven's name, is the matter with you?" he demanded. "Have you taken leave of your senses?"

He spoke in a tone of irritation and impatience; for they had been travelling since daybreak, and he was tired and hungry. They had travelled in advance of the men whom they had engaged on the way, so that, as Tusker said, he and Foyle might look round and make any preparations that might be necessary for the game of deception and fraud.

Having arrived at the spot—which Levison's maps and plans had made quite easy to find—he and Tusker had wearily unspanned, and set about getting their supper, when Tusker, looking upward, saw shining through the trees on the hill-top

a light which evidently was not from the stars. He touched Foyle on the arm.

"We're not alone," he said, pointing upwards.

Foyle glanced at the light, and shrugged his shoulders. He was too tired to feel much fear, and was ignorant of the dangers which beset solitary travellers in the bush; but Tusker continued to gaze, and at last he rose.

"I'm going to see what that is," he said. "I shan't be long. They may be friends or foes; anyway, they're unpleasantly near."

Foyle had nodded acquiescence, and gone on with his cooking. Few of his London intimates would have recognised him as he knelt beside the smoky fire; for in this wilderness Spencer Foyle did not trouble to mask his countenance in a pleasant smile, and the wolf which lurks within the skin of every such man looked out of his eyes and snarled through his lips. Besides, ever since the discovery that Nora had beaten him, ever since the day he had acted like a madman on board the "Ocean Star," Mr. Foyle had been somewhat changed. Love, or what he called love, had given place to hate; and, mingled with his ambition and greed for money, there was a deeply rooted desire for revenge upon the girl who had escaped him. In short, Mr. Foyle spent most of his time on the journey brooding, and was by no means a pleasant travelling companion.

"What *is* the matter—in the devil's name?" he snarled, drawing his revolver and looking round him in the darkness.

Tusker sank down on the ground and drew a long breath.

"Come nearer," he said; and his voice was hoarse and constrained. "I've got something to tell you, and I'm afraid lest the trees, the river, should hear me and—and carry the news."

Foyle sat down beside him, and stirred the pot in the darkness.

"'Pon my soul, my good Tusker, I do think you have taken leave of your senses!" he said, sarcastically.

"I dare say. I did myself, just now," said Tusker, more calmly. "You would if you'd seen what I've seen."

Foyle sneered. "What have you seen, in Heaven's name? A gang of bushrangers, or what?"

"I'll tell you. Give me the brandy flask; my mouth's parched as if I'd been running a mile."

Foyle passed him the flask, and Tusker drank and breathed hard. Then he laughed, a laugh of satisfaction, triumph, and evil complacency, which made Foyle stare.

"I went up the hill and through the trees," said Tusker, quite coolly and calmly now, "and at the very top I came upon a kind of clearing—a patch of rock which had been broken with a pick."

"Gold!" said Foyle, suddenly interested.

"That's what I thought at first; but it wasn't. Just beyond, among the trees, was a wagon. There was a light inside it, and men talking. I crept up and listened. They were talking about—about something I saw presently. The flap of the tilt was closed, but I opened it a bit and peeped in, and the first thing I saw was a man. And the sight of him made me think I must be dreaming. It was my old chum, Fawsett."

Foyle let the pot drop, and turned in the darkness to his companion, with an oath and an exclamation.

"Fawsett!"

"Yes; as sure as I'm sitting here. He had his face towards me, and the light was full on it. There's no mistake. It was he. Opposite him was a younger man—a man I don't know. I couldn't see his face. And between them, on a coat, was—the thing they had been talking about."

Tusker crept nearer, and his hot breath burnt against Foyle's cheek.

"*The thing was a heap of gems—opals, amethysts, topazes!*"

Foyle started, and would have cried out; but Tusker gripped his arm.

"Hush! They may have followed me. For God's sake, don't speak a word!"

"You're—you're mad!" whispered Foyle.

"Oh, no, I'm not. I'm sane enough. I tell you I saw them with my own eyes!" His eyes glittered in the darkness with evil greed, and he moistened his parched lips. "It was a heap—a pile—of gems fit for a king's ransom. The ground I'd thought was a gold-digging was an opal mine. There was enough in that heap to make a man—two men!—rich beyond the dreams of avarice."

He gave off the quotation with a dry, suppressed laugh, as if he were still fighting against the hysteria of excitement. "There are thousands of thousands of pounds in it. I know something of gems; I was concerned in that Hatton Garden affair— But no matter. I tell you I saw them as plainly as I see you—plainer, in this darkness." He wiped the sweat from his face, and felt for the flask again.

Foyle was silent a moment.

"Only two men?" he said, significantly.



"Only two," said Tusker, as meaningly.

"What do you propose?" whispered Foyle, after another pause.

"Let me think," said Tusker. "The damned thing is that they saw me—or, rather, one of them did. And that, unfortunately, was Fawsett. I was so struck of a heap by the sight of that mass of gems that I pressed forward unconsciously, and showed my face through the opening. It was only for a moment; but he turned green, and cried out. I fancy he thought he saw the ghost of me."

Foyle nodded.

"Then?"

Tusker shrugged his shoulders.

"I made for the undergrowth, and lay low; and only just in time, for the younger man was out of the wagon like a flash of lightning, and almost upon me."

Foyle sat motionless. His blood was running through his veins like fire. Tusker was by far the cooler of the two by this time.

"We must have those opals, Mr. Foyle," he said, as if he were making an ordinary business proposal. He laughed. "Levison never thought that he was putting us up to a job worth two of his bogus gold mines. Worth two—worth five of it! Why, that plot of ground must have been as thick with gems as a cake with currants!"

"What do you propose?" said Foyle again, in a hoarse whisper. "They are only two—"

Tusker nodded, and, breaking off a piece of grass, gnawed it thoughtfully.

"Yes," he said; "and if they hadn't seen me, nothing would have been easier. As it is, I'm not sure that Fawsett believed his own eyes. If he thought it was really a man—and me!"—he laughed—"they'd have been on the trail by this. For Fawsett knows me," he added, significantly. "As it is, there's no time to lose—if—if we mean business."

"If!" said Foyle, with sardonic irony. "It's two against two only!"

"Yes; and we have the pull, inasmuch as we know where they are, and they don't know our whereabouts. Give me some of that stew; I can feel for a plate; we must not show a spark of light. Take my advice, and eat something. This isn't a job for an empty stomach."

He began to eat coolly enough; but Foyle felt as if every piece of meat would choke him.

"That's better," said Tusker, as he put his empty plate

noiselessly on the ground. "Now I feel ready for business. See here, Mr. Foyle, this has got to be done at once. The men will be here presently, in a few hours at most. We've got to get that swag, and clear away before they arrive."

"Yes," said Foyle. "We'll meet them, and turn them back, go with them, for a time, at any rate."

"Good," said Tusker; "yes, that's the better plan. If—if"—his voice grew almost inaudible, though he was sitting so close—"those two up there should prove awkward and obstinate, and it's necessary to—to—"

Foyle nodded.

"Then we can come back and get the rest of the stones."

Foyle nodded again, and his eyes glistened as Tusker's had done. A devilish eagerness, a thirst for the opals, was consuming him like a fever.

Tusker took out his revolver and bowie-knife.

"Look to your tools, Mr. Foyle," he said, quietly. "My man, Fawsett, will fight, I know; and so will the young 'un, if I'm any judge of a man. It will be hot work—if we don't take them unawares."

Foyle examined his revolver.

"Now, here's the plan," said Tusker, as he replaced his weapons and tightened his belt. "We'll creep up by the way I came down until we reach the wagon. Then we separate—I going to the front, you to the rear. If they're asleep—"

"They'll sleep on forever!" said Foyle, grimly.

Tusker nodded.

"I'm afraid it will have to come to that," he said. "If they're awake, and spot us before we can master them, then we must make a row, as if we were twenty instead of two, and attack them openly. Anyhow, and anyway, we must have those stones, Mr. Foyle. It won't do to run against Providence; for, really, there's something providential in the way we've been led to this find, quite providential. How mad Levison will be!" and he smiled. "We'll fill that flask again, Mr. Foyle, and then we'll set off. Of course, it's share and share alike, as before?"

"Of course!" assented Foyle, impatiently. "But don't count your chickens before they're hatched, Tusker."

Tusker laughed softly.

"I can feel those gems in my hand at the present moment," he said.

Although they were ready, they sat and waited for quite half an hour. And in silence; for the Spirit of Murder sat

between them, and their throats were too dry, their tongues too heavy, for words.

"Now!" said Tusker at last, in a thick whisper.

They rose, and made their way slowly and cautiously up the hill, stopping at intervals to listen with suspended breath. But all was silent, and their victims apparently unapprehensive. Every now and then Foyle thought, "Fawsett, the convict; Nora's father!" and the thought sharpened his lust of covetousness and his murderous instincts. At the beginning of the clearing, and almost within sight of the wagon, Tusker drew Foyle flat to the ground and warned him to silence. Then, after a pause in which they could hear their own hearts beat, they separated and crawled like snakes towards the wagon.

Culmer, strange to say, was sleeping soundly—no doubt from the exhaustion following on the intense excitement. But Denis was awake and thinking. It was hard to believe that the man who had been so true and steadfast a friend and mate should be a convict—a criminal. But Denis resolved to forget it. He mentally swore that the facts he had learned from Culmer's own lips should make no difference between them. He owed a debt of gratitude to the man, and he would not forget it while life lasted. Culmer had made him rich, made him able to claim Nora, to clear Marishannon; and Culmer should remain his friend, let him have done what he might. He looked down at the rugged face pityingly, tenderly. The man was lying on his arm, the lines on his face showing plainly, a frown on his brow, his lips set tight. Denis leant forward to draw the rug over him more comfortably, and at that moment he heard a faint movement outside the wagon. His hand stopped, then went to his revolver, and he waited and listened. The noise came again. In the intense silence it was an electric shock striking on Denis's alert and strained senses. He touched Culmer softly—he knew that the softest touch would wake him—and, putting his lips almost to his ear, whispered:

"Quiet!"

Culmer opened his eyes, and at the same moment his revolver was in his hand. A second after, with a yell, Tusker had torn open the flap and fired, and Foyle, with an echoing shout, sprang upon the shaft of the wagon and fired also. Denis and Culmer, as if they were moved by the same set of strings, flung themselves down face forward for an instant; then, almost before the second volley passed over them, they sprang out, rushed to the nearest tree, and stood with their

backs to it, their revolvers covering the two forms which stood out in the darkness.

"Hands up!" shouted Tusker. "We're five to one! Hands up, Fawsett! I know you!"

"And I know you—you hound!" shouted Culmer.

His voice was clear and firm; all his late fright seemed to have vanished and given place to his wonted courage. As he spoke, he fired twice. But the light was uncertain, and he missed. For a moment or two the semi-darkness was lit up by the flashing, the silence broken by the hideous barking of the revolvers. Culmer's left arm rose suddenly, and then dropped limply. He was struck, and Tusker saw it, and laughed fiendishly as he fired again. His bullet struck Culmer's revolver and knocked it out of his hand.

"Finish him—I'll manage the other!" said Foyle.

Tusker fired again at the very moment he felt himself struck, and Culmer fell face forward.

In this second or two of time, Denis had seen that it was folly to stand up as a mark for two men, and with a bound he flung himself on Foyle, and, knocking the smoking revolver out of his hand, grappled with him.

Foyle was quite unequal to cope with Denis—Denis in the plentitude of his strength, with muscles like steel and nerves like iron—and Denis had got him on the ground very quickly.

With an oath, Foyle called to Tusker; and Tusker was hastening to his aid, and had got his revolver pointed at Denis, when Culmer, who was only partially stunned, seized him by the leg. Tusker fell, but in falling fired at Denis, who, though he was not hit, was blinded by the closeness of the explosion. Foyle seized his opportunity, and contrived to get his bowie-knife free, and struck madly upwards. Denis ward-ed the blow, and the two men, both on their last legs now, joined in that awful business—a knife-fight to the death. The uplifted knives gleamed in the light which poured through the opening of the tent from the lantern; and it is scarcely too much to say that the two men's eyes gleamed as sharply, as their forms, now apart, now linked together, swayed to and fro. Suddenly, as in the course of their struggle they moved into the light, Denis saw and recognised his foe.

"Foyle!" he cried.

Foyle laughed quickly, pantingly, as if in assent.

"Denis Denison!" he said, with hysteric amazement.

Denis shifted his foot, and releasing his arm, made a plunge with his knife; but Foyle, who was as sinuous as a snake, dodged it, and at the instant Tusker, who had freed himself

from Culmer, struck Denis a heavy blow on the side of the head with the butt end of the revolver. Denis's grip of Foyle relaxed, and he fell forward.

Foyle kicked at him and snarled—like a wolf, or, rather, a cur.

"Damn him!" he said. "He would have finished me in another moment!"

"Look after him while I get the gems!" cried Tusker. He leapt into the wagon as he spoke.

Foyle look round, as if to see if he were observed, then bent over Denis's prostrate body, and raised the long knife. There was murder—cold-blooded murder in his eyes. Even as the knife was poised and about to fall, Tusker came to the end of the wagon.

"Hi! Stop!" he yelled. "Don't strike! *The box is not here!*"

Foyle had actually commenced the downward stroke, and had only time to swerve the knife aside; it stabbed deeply into the ground instead of Denis's heart. Foyle looked round with starting eyes and livid lips, and swore at the interruption.

"No use killing him until we know where the box is!" said Tusker, leaping down and bending over Denis. "Lucky for us if he isn't dead already; we shall never find it if he is. The brandy, quick! Was there ever such luck!"

He tore the top off the flask, and forced some of the spirit through Denis's clenched teeth.

"If he's dead, we're sold," he said, with an oath.

Foyle stood, feeling his throat, which Denis's sinewy hands had gripped like a vice.

"What about the other man?" he demanded, hoarsely.

"Dead as a herring, I should say," said Tusker, coolly.

"This young 'un's alive, thank goodness. He's coming to—"

Foyle sprang to the wagon, and took up a rope.

"Tie him up," he said.

Tusker looked at him half-curiously, half-scornfully.

"We're two to one," he said. "But perhaps you're right." He wound the rope round Denis's body and arms, and, as he came to, Tusker and Foyle between them propped him up against a tree, and tied him to the trunk.

"Give him some more brandy," said Tusker. Foyle applied the flask to Denis's lips, and after a time Denis looked round vaguely and vacantly.

"Are—are they beat, Culmer?" he said, faintly. "I know one of them—a man named Foyle—"

Foyle went close up to him, and looked into his eyes sneeringly and tauntingly.

"Your knowledge will die with you, my young friend," he said.

"Shut up, Mr. Foyle," interposed Tusker, warningly. "We want to know where the box is. Come, my man, own the game's up so far as you're concerned, and tell us where you've hid the box."

Denis had recovered consciousness by this time. He looked full in Foyle's face.

"Tell you, you thief, you scoundrel!" he said, hoarsely. "Not if my life depended upon it!"

"Well—it does!" said Tusker, with a grim smile. "Hold hard, Mr. Foyle; don't fire! Come, Mr. Denis, if that's your name, give the thing up. Where's the box?"

"Find it!" said Denis, between his set teeth. "You will have no help from me."

Foyle raised his hand to strike him; but Tusker caught it.

"Look here," he said to Denis; "we mean having the box—of course, you know that—and we'll have it if we wait here a week—a month. And if we wait, so will you—tied to that tree as you are. Come, be reasonable. All's fair in this kind of game."

Denis shut up his lips tightly, and looked as if he had not heard.

Tusker swore; but a glance at the resolute, blood-stained face told him that Denis would remain silent till death. "Let's see if we can find it," he said. "They've buried it, of course, and it can't be far. Look sharp, Mr. Foyle!" For Foyle seemed fascinated by the sight of his helpless foe—fascinated with gloating. Tusker and he began to examine the ground with the light of the lantern.

Denis watched them with an agony of anxiety, which grew deeper whenever he turned his eyes upon the motionless figure of his comrade.

Suddenly Tusker uttered a cry of delight.

"Here! Give me that spade! My God, we've got 'em!"

Denis saw them frantically dig up the box and prize open the lid, and heard the deep, guttural notes of surprise and joy to which they gave utterance.

He sighed. Culmer was dead. The treasure gone.

Presently he saw Foyle draw Tusker aside and whisper in his ear. They both glanced at him, and there was something in the sudden pallor of their faces, in the contracted nostrils, the set lips, which told him what they were resolving on.

Foyle came up and drew his revolver, examined it closely, then lowered it, and, still eyeing Denis with a cruel, wolf-like stare, said:

"I don't know whether you are a religious man, Mr. Denis; but if you are, I should advise you to say a prayer. My friend and I, after some discussion, have arrived at the melancholy decision that it will be better to enforce your silence in the most effectual way." He took out his cigarette-case, lit a cigarette by the light of the lantern, and smoked for a moment or two; then, "Are you ready?" he said, politely. "I am sorry to hurry you, but time presses."

Tusker came up with the box under his arm.

"Hold hard, Mr. Foyle! Give the young fellow a chance, damn it! Here, sir; we mean you no harm, and we'll do you none if you'll promise—you're a gentleman, I take it, and a promise will do—that you'll keep your tongue quiet and never split on us. One word—if not, to blazes with you!"

"Never!" said Denis. "I will never say it!"

"Then—" said Foyle, as he raised his revolver.

As he did so, a faint sound came through the trees. Tusker started.

"What's that?" he said, sharply.

Before Foyle could reply, or scarcely listen, the sound of a rifle pierced the stillness, and his arm dropped to his side.

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## CHAPTER XXXV.

NORA and her faithful friend sailed one day earlier than Spencer Foyle, and, as it happened, by a faster vessel, so that when the "Ocean Star" arrived at Melbourne, Nora was waiting for Mr. Foyle.

From behind the curtain of the hotel window she saw him and Tusker pass up the street, and holding Dora back that she might not be seen, Nora, pale and constrained, said, in a low voice:

"That is the man I have followed to Australia."

Now, up to this time, Nora had not enlightened Dora as to the object of their long and sudden journey, and Dora, not unnaturally, uttered an exclamation of surprise. That Nora—her queenly Nora—should follow any man was matter for astonishment, but that the man should be Mr. Spencer Foyle, filled Dora with amazement.

"Do you mean to say that—that you've followed him all this way! That you care enough for him— Oh, I won't believe it!"

Nora turned scarlet, and then pale.

"No," she said; "you could not believe it if I were man enough to say it. Care for Spencer Foyle!" Her eyes flashed. "It is not because I—care for him, that I have followed him, but because I hate him and detest him; because I want to warn some one of his presence. That man has come over to injure—perhaps to *kill*, for he is utterly unscrupulous—some one whom—whom—"

"You do care for? Then it's a man!" said Dora.

"Yes," said Nora, in a low voice. "He, the man I want to put on his guard, is over here—I do not know where—but I know that Foyle is on his track, and that he intends to take him unawares and rob him."

Dora sank into a chair, as if overwhelmed by the weight of this communication and the revelation of this new phase of her friend's character.

"And you have thrown up your part, left your friends, and come all this way to warn him, and thwart Mr. Foyle!" she said.

"Not all my friends; I brought one, the best and most devoted, with me," Nora reminded her, gently. "Why are you so surprised, Dora?"

"Because—don't be angry, dear—but I—I didn't think you were that sort of girl; I mean, you always seemed so cold, so indifferent, to all men—even to poor young Lord Vernon—that I didn't think you *could* love any man well enough to give up so much for him, and to run such risks."

The red stole over Nora's face again, and a light glanced in her eyes.

"You were wrong," she said. Then, as if speaking to herself, she went on, in a tone that thrilled and awed Dora: "Yes, I love him. Listen, Dora; I can't tell you who he is, or anything about him—except that I have known him all my life. We were boy and girl together, and my love for him grew as I grew. It became part of my very self; so much so that I didn't realise that I loved him—just as we do not realise that we walk, and eat, and sleep. It was part of myself. Then, one day, it came home to me; and I knew, too, that he loved me. We parted a few days after we made the discovery, after we learnt our own hearts; and I have not seen him since. He does not know who I am, where I am, and I do not know where he is. But I love him with all my heart and soul. There is not an hour of the day that I do not think of him. I wake at night with his name on my lips. There is no other man in the world for me—" Something rose



suddenly in her throat and stopped her, and she turned her face away.

"And now you will find him, save him from this man Foyle, and—marry him!" whispered Dora.

There was a moment's pause, then Nora turned, grave and sad.

"No," she said; "I shall never marry him, Dora. There is a gulf between us; a barrier has arisen, a great stone wall, which neither of us can ever pass. I shall never marry him, but I shall go on loving him till I die. And I am going to save him—if I can—from this fiend in human form. Nora, I have told you all I can, dear; but you must decide whether you will remain with me or go back. Wait!" for Dora had opened her lips to respond promptly. "Consider all the risks we must run. We have to deal with a villain as cunning as he is unscrupulous. I have to set my brains against his, to meet cunning with cunning, craft with craft—and I have to fight the battle alone, unless you join me."

"Of course, I shall not leave you," said Dora, gently. "To tell you the truth, I rather like the idea of thwarting Mr. Foyle—didn't I say there was something about him that I didn't like the first time I saw him? But, Olive, dear, why not get the police to help?"

Nora shook her head.

"How can I? I have no definite information; I am acting on suspicion. No! not suspicion, but instinct; the instinct that makes one sure, when one sees a snake gliding through the grass, that it is in search of prey. And how could the police help me? I cannot even tell them where Foyle is going!"

"They could shadow him," said Dora, shrewdly.

"We can do that," said Nora. "There are things I cannot tell the police, or any one. No, I must act for myself. I am not afraid. See, dear, I have thought out a plan of operation. Foyle and the man with him have gone to the National Hotel. I can see the door from this window. Their luggage cannot leave the hotel without my knowledge; and where they go, we follow. Before I left London I bought a couple of nurses' dresses. They are the best disguise a woman could have, and Foyle will never suspect that the two closely veiled women are you and me. Remember, too, that he has no suspicion that I have left England."

"I see," said Dora, her eyes brightening. "I rather like this business, Olive. And what will you do when you get to your friend?"

"Just warn him by word of mouth or letter," said Dora. "That will be enough; for he is strong and cool, and more than a match for Spencer Foyle when it comes to hand-to-hand fighting. I am not afraid!" Her eyes glowed. "Now, dear, we will put on the nurses' dresses, and prepare to follow wherever Spencer Foyle goes."

There was a self-possession, a calm determination about her which made Dora shudder.

"I wouldn't be in Spencer Foyle's shoes for something, if you and he come to open blows, Olive!" she remarked.

"The day of reckoning will come," said Nora, with a quiet air of conviction.

Disguised in the nurses' uniforms, they kept a close and continual watch upon Foyle's movements. For two or three days he and his companion left the hotel for short periods, and Nora discovered that they were purchasing a wagon and stores for a journey. This served to strengthen her suspicions, but it also caused her much anxiety and disquietude. It was evident that Foyle was going into the wilds: how was she to follow him without means of conveyance and some kind of escort?

She was pondering over this as she lay on her bed, where she had thrown herself after a long day's watch, when Dora knocked at the door, and cried to her to open it.

Nora sprang to it, and Dora burst in.

"Olive, they're gone!" she gasped.

Nora drew her in and closed the door.

"They're gone! They have driven away with the luggage in a cab!"

Nora snatched at her black bonnet with its long veil, and put it on quickly.

"I will follow them," she said. "Stay here. Call for the bill, and pay it, and be ready to start when I come back!" They had kept their things packed in readiness.

Nora hurried from the hotel, and made straight for the railway station. But her cab was blocked in one of the streets, and she reached the terminus just in time to be too late. The train was moving from the platform, and she saw Foyle looking out from one of the carriage windows, almost as if he suspected that he was being followed.

She enquired of one of the porters where the train was going; but his reply, containing the names of half a dozen places, was of no service to her. For a moment or two she stood overwhelmed by her failure.

"Dora was right," she said to herself, with bitter self-re-

proach. "I ought to have gone to the police! Oh, Denis, Denis!"

The tears sprang to her eyes and half-blinded her, so that, as she turned away, she almost ran against a man.

"I beg your pardon," she murmured, mechanically.

"Sure, and it's me that begs yours, miss," said the man.

Something in his voice struck Nora, even in the moment of her confusion and distress, and she stopped and looked at him. He was a young man, decently dressed, but with the look of a countryman, and an Irishman to boot. Something familiar in his face and manner impressed her; but she was hurrying on, when, with a kind of gasp, the man started, and put his hand on her arm.

"Miss Nora?" he cried.

Then Nora knew him.

"Donovan!" she said, amazed and bewildered.

"Sure, an' it *is* Miss Nora!" he said, after they had stared at each other for a moment or two. "I ain't drainin', and it's yerself, Nora?"

"Yes," said Nora, trying to smile. "And you, Donovan—you are here—all this way! Oh, how strange! How strange!"

"Faith, an' I don't know whether I'm on me head or me heels!" he said, tilting his hat and scratching his head. "An' what brings ye here, Miss Nora?"

Nora parried the question.

"I might ask you that, Donovan," she said.

He looked at her in a helpless fashion. It was Nora Neil, of Marishannon, right enough. And yet the change in her voice—its fuller tones, its acquired refinement—the dignity of her bearing—in short, the development that had taken place in her, puzzled and confused poor Donovan; and, even as he stood there, he realised that this "grand lady," as he would have called her, was still farther beyond his reach than the old Nora had been.

"An' that's soon answered, Miss Nora," he said. "I'm here seekin' my fortune. I did think of Ameriky, but a man as had come back from Australy says, says he, 'Try Melbourne, Donovan,' an' I tried her. It was all one to me where I went after—after—"

He stopped, and Nora blushed slightly and smiled sadly.

"You must tell me all your adventures, Donovan," she said.

And poor Donovan felt, with every word and every kindly accent, still further removed from her.

"Sure, an' I will, with all the heart in the worrld!" he re-

joined, cheerfully. "But you haven't told me what you're doin' here, Miss Nora. Is it—nursin' ye are?"

Nora looked helplessly from side to side. Should she tell Donovan something, at least, of her trouble, and ask for his help?

"Will you come with me to my hotel, Donovan?" she said.

"I'll come with you to the end of the airth for the bare askin', in coorse!" said Donovan; and they walked away side by side. Every now and then he glanced at her out of the corners of his eyes curiously; and, whenever he did so, he sighed. They reached the hotel, and found Dora seated, literally ready to start at a moment's notice. She looked rather surprised at Nora's companion.

"Have you found—?" she began; but Nora stopped her.

"I have found an old friend, Dora," she said, as she introduced Donovan, who regarded the bright and pretty face of the actress with all an Irishman's admiration for female beauty.

"It is quite an unexpected meeting; and, Dora, shall I ask him to help us?"

"Just you say 'Yes,' Miss Moberley," put in Donovan.

"It's the prettiest word for pretty lips—axin' your pardon!—an' I'm just dyin' to be of service to Miss—"

"Merton!" said Nora, quickly.

"Miss Merton," finished Donovan, with native quickness and gravity.

"Yes," said Dora, after another long look at the honest and handsome face; "you can trust Mr. Donovan, I'm sure, Olive."

"Thrust me, is it?" said Donovan, fervently. "Sure, and Miss—Merton can thrust me as far as Ballyconna, and that's farther than most of us care to go."

"Donovan," said Nora, suddenly—she had been thinking deeply but rapidly—"I am searching for Master Denis."

Donovan started, and looked hard at her, and—understood.

"Master Denis, is it?" he said, staring straight before him.

"And I don't know where to look for him. He is here—in this country—and in danger!"

"Danger, is it?" said Donovan. "Faith, thin, Master Denis is enjoyin' himself, for I never knew him half so happy as when he was riskin' his limbs or his neck."

Nora blushed with pleasure, and then sighed with anxiety.

"Ah, Donovan, yes! But this is danger from a secret and crafty foe." She went on to explain how she and Dora had followed the foe, and lost him only half an hour ago; and she asked Donovan plainly if he could help them.

"In coorse," said Donovan, in a matter-of-fact way, as if it were indeed "of course." "It's Heaven's luck that sent me here to help you, Miss—"

"But, Donovan, what are we to do? I cannot tell where the man has gone. But, oh! forgive me my selfishness! I have not even asked whether you have business of your own to attend to. Have you? Tell me frankly, Donovan!" And she fixed her great eyes to him.

"Faith, an' I'll tell you," said he. "It's true I had some business; but it may go to the bottom of the say, for all I care now."

"What was it?" asked Nora, that she might decide whether she might accept the sacrifice of his interests.

"Well, it's just to take a small gang o' men to a ranch in the bush," said Donovan, with a touch of pride. "There's a gentleman as is goin' to prospect for gold, and I was startin' with half a dozen boys, with the necessary tools to do the diggin'. We was to start in three days. But don't you look like that, Miss No—Merton. They're boys I can thrust—they most o' 'em come from the ould counthry, by token; didn't I choose 'em meself! And I'll make one o' 'em captain in my place." He drew out a stiff sheet of paper.

"Them's my instructions, and there's the map," he said. "The gentleman's started to-day, and we was to follow—"

Nora gazed at the paper absently.

"I must not let you give up this engagement, Donovan," she said, ruefully.

"Sure, and it's not 'lettin'; it's given up, it is, already! I'll hand it over to the best o' the boys in a jiffy. An', as for the master, well, he's a pleasant-spoken gintleman, and he'll understand that a man's no man's servant when a lady wants him. An' sure, miss, you'll be rememberin' the gintleman himself. It's him as was stayin' at Marishannon Hall."

Nora shook her head. "I do not know him," she said. "What is his name, Donovan?"

"It's Mister Foyle," said Donovan. "He went just as you did, as you may say—oh, Lor'! whativer's the matter?" For Nora had uttered a cry and darted at the paper and map.

"Foyle, Foyle! did you say? Oh, tell me again, Donovan!" she cried, in wild excitement and incredulity.

"Yes, sure, it's Foyle!" said Donovan, open-eyed.

Nora flung herself on her knees before the map, and studied it with frenzied eagerness; then she sprang up, and confronted them with flashing eyes and flaming cheeks.

"Dora, I've found him! I know now where he is! Oh, it is wonderful! No, Donovan, you shall not break your engagement. You shall take the men where Mr. Foyle ordered you. For it's *there*"—she pointed with her finger at a spot in the map—"that Denis is; and Spencer Foyle is the villain whom I want to follow and baulk! Yes, you shall go, Donovan, *and we'll go with you!*"

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## CHAPTER XXXVI.

By dint of extraordinary exertion and the expenditure of a large sum of money, they were enabled to start some thirty-six hours before the time appointed by Foyle; and the journey— Well, in after years the remembrance of that journey across the mountains and the plains had the power to quicken the pulses of Nora's heart and send the blood rushing to her face. They travelled as if in very truth they were on a matter of life and death. All day Nora sat in the front of the wagon, and, with her hand shading her eyes, gazed before her; or rode on ahead, as far as Donovan would permit her, tortured by impatience at the comparatively slow pace of the *cor-tège* behind. And too often, at night, she lay awake with feverish longing, with terrible foreboding. It seemed to her that they would never, never reach their destination—that place where Denis, all unconscious of his crafty foe, was toiling for her sake!

But for the presence of Dora, the increasing anxiety would have broken her down; but Dora's light and hopeful spirit sustained her friend. And Dora found an admirable help-mate in Donovan. These two seemed united by the tie of love and sympathy with Nora, and they joined their forces in comforting and encouraging her. The "boys," as Donovan called them, were, as he had said, of the right sort; and not a complaint was uttered at the enforced marches and the troubles and toils of the way. Not one of them had the least idea of the real object of the journey; but they one and all knew that it was to serve "the beautiful mistress," as they called Nora, and considered themselves amply rewarded for their exertions by the kind word and gentle smile which, even in her anxiety, Nora bestowed on them.

They had taken a couple of spare horses, and Donovan had taught Dora to ride the quietest of them; and, as he invariably rode at her side, these two spent a good deal of time together. The admiration with which Donovan had regarded her at their

first meeting did not by any means diminish on this strange and fateful journey; and, while watching over and sustaining Nora, these two grew very friendly. Dora was never tired of listening to the story of Donovan's adventures, and his description of home life in far-away Marishannon, of which he talked frequently—though he never referred to Nora. By degrees Dora came to consider the handsome young Irishman as the best specimen of the genus Man which she had met with; and Donovan, feeling that all chance of Nora had indeed vanished from him, grew soft-hearted towards the young girl who had at least one thing in common with him—devotion for Nora.

A journey across the wilds of Australia is not a picnic by any means; and accidents, which tried both temper and patience, frequently occurred; but Donovan behaved like a second Mark Tapley, and came up smiling after the severest knock-down blow, in the shape of a broken axle, a lame horse, or the complete overturning of the whole "box of tricks," as he called the wagon. On all these and sundry occasions, Dora watched Donovan exerting his strength and encouraging the men, and listened to his cheery voice with admiration and a kind of pleasure which rather puzzled her. For Miss Dora Moberley was not one of the sentimental kind, and she was loath to believe that she was really falling in love with a man—a sort of animal she had hitherto regarded with a mixture of pity and good-natured contempt.

"I think the Irish language is really very musical, you know," she said to Nora one night, as they were turning in, and Donovan's rich brogue cut the air like a cheese-knife.

"Donovan has a musical voice," said Nora, absently.

"Hasn't he! And he is so good-natured and ready for anything," said Dora, as she peeped through the opening of the wagon towards the group of men setting up the tent. "Nothing comes amiss to him. Listen to him now, coaxing that black horse past the fire. I think he is a remarkably nice and clever man, Olive. I've never met any one like him—the Irishman on the stage isn't a bit like him."

"He has been a good friend to me," said poor Nora, gratefully. "What should we have done without him? We should not have been here!"

"No, indeed. I suppose he will remain in Australia?" she added, almost to herself, and very reflectingly. "It seems a pity. England can't well spare such good men as Mr. Donovan, I'm sure." And as Donovan came up to the wagon, and raised his cap, and, in the thickest of brogues, wanted to

know if there was anything they wanted before he turned in, she nodded and smiled at him, and wished him good-night in a voice so heavenly sweet that Donovan went off with his head well up and his heart playing pit-a-pat—almost as it had done in the days when he had hoped to win Nora Neil.

There was no chance of their missing their way, for they were following in the track of Foyle and Tusker, and one evening, Donovan, pointing to the freshness of the wheel and hoof-marks, said, gravely:

"We're right upon their heels, Miss Merton." He had grown accustomed to the stage name by this time. "What'll we do now? Go on, right up to them, or lie by a bit?"

"No, no!" said Nora, quickly. "We must overtake them."

"Then we'll go on to-morrow morning first thing," said Donovan.

"Not to-night?" asked Nora, anxiously.

Donovan glanced at the sky, from which the sun had set some time since.

"Better not, Miss Nora," he said. "The horses are tired, and—and I'd rather tackle Mr. Foyle in the daylight."

She sighed, but acquiesced, and went to the wagon. But half an hour afterwards Donovan heard his name called, and found her moving towards him, her face pale, her eyes full of foreboding.

"Donovan, we must go on!" she said. "I—I cannot tell you why, but I feel that we must. My heart aches with a sense of danger to Denis. I feel as if—as if he were near." The last words were almost inaudible, but her eyes gave them emphasis.

"Right it is," said Donovan. "We can't be far from the place now, Miss Nora; and, I'm thinkin' that I'll take one or two of the boys and go on."

"No," she said; "take me, Donovan. I will go."

He remonstrated, but to no purpose, and eventually saddled her horse. In five minutes both the women were standing beside him.

"You didn't suppose I was going to be left behind, Mr. Donovan, did you?" remarked Dora, resolutely.

Donovan grinned.

"Thrust you for that, if there's any fun goin' forward, Miss Dora!" he said; and, without another word, he saddled her horse also. They started almost in silence, and followed the trail for some time; but suddenly Nora reined in her horse and listened, looking up the hill-side.



"I heard voices, Donovan," she said; "up the mountain—"

"Are ye sure now, thin?" he asked, rather dubiously. "Me own ears are sharp, but I didn't catch—"

Before he could finish the sentence, a shout was heard, right above their heads, as it seemed. They looked at each other, and Nora turned up the mountain, and urged her horse forward. Donovan was by her side in a moment.

"Ye'll let me go first, if ye please, Miss Nora," he said, firmly.

As he spoke, there came the report of a revolver. It was nearer than they had thought, and spurring their horses into a gallop, they made for the spot. In a moment or two they saw a faint light—the light of the lantern in the wagon—heard another shot fired, and then, suddenly, came in sight of the scene of villainy.

Nora saw the form of Denis tied to a tree, and saw nothing else. She could not cry out, for her tongue seemed to cleave to the roof of her mouth; but Nora shrieked, and as the scream rang out, Donovan flung himself from his horse, took careful aim with his Winchester, and shot Foyle through the right arm. The interposition was only just in time, for Foyle had fired even as his hand dropped.

He stood for a moment, stunned by the suddenness and unexpectedness of the attack, and stared in the direction of the shot. Tusker sprang to his side, and peered through the trees.

"By God, we're spotted! There's some one coming on a horse! Quick, man! Don't stand there like a stuck pig!" And he shook Foyle by the arm.

Foyle recovered from his stupor, uttered an oath, and, springing forward, caught up the spade with his left hand, and struck Denis across the head.

"Run like blazes! There's the box!" said Tusker, in a thick whisper.

As he spoke, he snatched up the lantern and dashed it to the ground. In the darkness, as the two men, bending low, ran through the bush, they heard a woman's screaming and the sound of voices.

"What's it mean?" asked Tusker, hoarsely. "Women! But we'll slip them yet! You've got the box, Foyle?"

"The box? No!" said Foyle.

Tusker turned on him with a snarl.

"It lay beside you—I put it there—I told you! I'm not going without it!" he added, with a string of oaths.

As he spoke, he stopped short, and, in his frenzy of disappointment, stood upright. At the same moment the light of a torch flashed over the scene. It must have fallen full upon him and rendered him an easy mark, for the Winchester barked again, and Tusker, with a scream, leapt into the air, and fell on his face.

Foyle lay beside him for a moment or two; then he crawled down the slope until he gained the shelter of the thick trees and could run upright.

Donovan held the torch above his head, and lit up the gruesome scene. Nora had thrown herself upon Denis, and was vainly attempting to unfasten the ropes which bound him. Dora, white and shaking, was kneeling beside Culmer. Not a sound came from either woman now; it was no time for screams or cries of terror and distress. Donovan lit the lantern, and hastened to Denis.

"He is dead!" said Nora, in tones of anguish and despair. "We are too late. Oh, Denis, Denis!"

But she still fumbled at the ropes.

"Not a bit of it, Miss Nora!" cried Donovan. "Don't ye belave it. Sure, and Master Denis ain't the first lad as has had a crack on the skull!"

He cut the ropes as he spoke, and caught Denis's form as it dropped forward, and laid it gently on the grass.

"Get me some water—see if there's a flask!"

Nora leapt into the wagon and brought the flask.

"Now open his shirt wide at the collar! Dead? Not he! Hush! don't ye cry out and startle him! Ah, that's right—hold his head up!" For Nora had taken Denis's head to its proper resting-place—her bosom. "Sure, and he'll be alive and askin' for his shillelagh agin ye can say Jack Robinson!" Donovan continued with desperate cheerfulness. But he watched the white, blood-stained face rather anxiously. "An' how is it with the other man, Miss Dora?" he called to her.

Dora uttered a piteous little moan.

"Oh! I don't know! I'm afraid—afraid!" she whispered.

"Thin don't let him hear ye say so," retorted Donovan.

"Don't discourage him, Miss Dora! Here!" He flung the flask over his shoulder. "Help me carry Master Denis into the wagon, Miss Nora, an' thin I'll take a look at the other."

They carried Denis—Nora seemed suddenly endowed with supernatural strength—into the wagon; and Donovan, leaving him in her charge for the moment, ran to Dora's side.

"The undertaker's robbed this time, praise be to the powers!" he exclaimed, as he felt Culmer's heart. "The man's

alive right enough. Get me some water. What now!—what are ye cryin' for?"

"I'm not!" said Dora, dashing her hand over her eyes as she ran towards the rill.

She bathed Culmer's forehead while Donovan poured half the water into his cap and ran with it to the wagon; and as he reached it he saw Denis open his eyes, and heard him mutter:

"Rich, Culmer! Rich, Nora!"

Nora bent over him, her eyes blinded with tears, and wiped the blood from his face, shuddering as she did so.

"He's all right!" said Donovan, cheerfully. "Don't be scared, Miss Nora; it's knocked the wits out o' him a bit; but that's better than the life o' him! No, no; don't give him the brandy; his brain's hot enough without that!"

He ran back to Dora, and found Culmer lying with open eyes, and breathing painfully; and Donovan gave a low but cheerful "whoop!"

"Sure, Miss Dora, an' it ain't worse than a bit o' a mill after a rale good fair in the ould country. He's comin' to! How is it, mate?" He nodded at Culmer encouragingly.

"Is—is—he—killed?" were the first words Culmer said.

"What, Master Denis! Devil a bit, man! Is it a tap like that as 'ud put Master Denis under ground? He's no more dead thin yerself, glory be praised!"

Culmer tried to rise, but sank back with a sigh.

"I want to go to him. Where is he?" he asked. "Don't—don't bother with me; see to him. The—the devil fired at him!"

"Put his head on something, Miss Dora—here, here's a box. By the powers, it's heavy!" He lifted *the* box under Culmer's head, and beckoned to Dora. "He'll do for awhile. There's one other—p'r'aps you didn't notice?"

Dora started. She had forgotten Donovan's last shot. She followed him through the brake, and presently Donovan stopped her, and bent down over a figure stretched out full length. He examined it for a moment, then he looked up and shook his head gravely as he took Dora's arm, and turned her away.

"Come along, Miss Dora," he said, quietly. "He won't be missin' us!" They turned back to the camp, to find that Culmer had recovered sufficient strength to crawl to the wagon, where, holding on by both hands, he was advising and encouraging Nora.

"Bandage his head—I can't move, or I'd show you the way, miss," he was saying, hoarsely. "He's strong—and—

and—oh, God, let him live! You don't know what he is to me; what a fine, brave, true-hearted young fellow! You don't know him as I do—you, a stranger—or you'd know what a valuable life is strugglin' there! There isn't another like him in all the world. There's quinine in that box hangin' up there—I can't move—I'm helpless!" He shook with pain as he clung to the wagon; and his eyes burnt with the fever of bodily and mental anguish, as he gazed at Denis's face—pallid and deathlike. At last, with a fearful effort, he managed to drag himself up beside her and helped her.

Donovan tried to persuade him to lie down; but Culmer turned upon him almost savagely.

"For God's sake, let me alone, and think of him!" he said. "It's him you've got to save. What's it matter about me? There's life before him—life and happiness; there's nothing before me!" Then he bent over Denis, and in a strangely altered voice, so soft and gentle that it brought the tears to the eyes of the two women, he murmured:

"Denis, lad, how goes it? Do you know me? It's me, old Culmer, your mate, you know!"

Denis chanced to smile, though he neither heard the voice, nor felt the rough—and tender—hand of his chum and partner.

"Rich, rich! Nora, Nora!" he whispered.

"He's delirious," said Culmer. "It's concussion of the brain—fever; an' no doctor near! Oh, my God, save him!" he cried, in a hoarse whisper. "Save him, and punish them!"

"Sure, an' He'll save him!" said Donovan, consolingly. "An' as to punishin' them as dealt him the foul blow, well—there's only one left to punish. I carried out the contract on the other, old man! Now, Miss Nora, you leave Master Denis to me, an' I'll make him comfortable and aisy, and then you can nurse him as if you were indade and in thruth one o' the rale nursin' sisters!"

He got Nora out of the wagon, got Denis out of his clothes and into his pyjamas, and then called Nora back to her place. He would have done the same for Culmer; but Culmer repulsed him almost fiercely, and would only permit him to dress an awful wound in his leg—and even that much attendance he bore impatiently.

"You said one was—killed?" he asked of Donovan, when the bandage was tied. "Which—which was it?"

"Indade, and I don't know. I'd no toime to make choice," said Donovan. "But he lies out in the bush yonder, waitin' crowner's 'quest."

Culmer took a pine torch, and crawled to the spot, turned the dead man over, and looked long and steadily on his face. Then he came back, and lay down beside the wagon, where he could listen to Denis's ravings. So what was left of the night passed; and soon after dawn Donovan went to the look-out, and yelled and shouted for his men. On his way he stumbled across the box, cursed it good-temperedly, and, rubbing his ankle, brought it to Culmer.

"Faith, an' I wish you wouldn't leave your tool-chests lying about to break folks' legs!" he said.

Culmer looked at the box with lack-lustre eyes, and then turned them away as with loathing: it was for the sake of the gems within that Denis had been stricken down. Donovan, with no idea of the contents, lifted the box into the wagon.

In response to the shouting, his men rode quickly up the hill, and surveyed the scene with amazement and consternation.

"Yes, there's been red-hot murder done," said Donovan, as he explained the situation. "Did ye meet a tall, thin-lookin' scoundrel by any chance, boys?"

The men looked at each other; then the spokesman of the party said, rather sheepishly:

"There was a man came ridin' towards us, a thin-faced, dark man, with a lame arm—"

"That's him, the scoundrel!" cried Donovan. "Where is he?"

"He said that there was murder goin' on up there, and that we was to hurry up. An' he borrowed our best horse to ride to the next station for the police."

"An' ye didn't stop the villain!" exclaimed Donovan; and he followed up with a string of sulphuric language, which Dora rebuked—though with a curious look in her eyes.

Two of the men were told off in pursuit of the fugitive, but they returned at nightfall, having failed to overtake him. They had given him their best horse, and Foyle had taken advantage of his start. Donovan himself made a reconnoitre, and found Foyle's camp and wagon in the ravine below. He confiscated the wagon and horses and other property, and held an inquest on the body of Tusker. The jury found a verdict of "justifiable homicide," and Tusker was buried beside the river. Culmer crawled down to watch the ceremony, and, after the others had gone, stood beside the grave with a grim look on his wan and shrunken face. Then he crawled back again to his place beside the wagon.

The days passed, and Denis still remained unconscious, and

Nora still nursed him. It was a time of terrible strain and anxiety. For hours she would sit, her lovely eyes resting on his face, growing thinner and more haggard each day, his hot hand held in hers. Sometimes he would rave with delirium, and she had to listen to an incoherent account of the attack by Foyle and Tusker; but more often he lay quite still, and rambled over his past life in Marishannon. And through it all ran, like a river, his love for Nora. Sometimes they were in the boat, and it was "Nora, mavourneen, put the helm down!" Or they were nutting in the woods, and he would call out, in boyish voice, "Nora, dear—you stupid little kid!—come out of that tree; you'll break your neck directly! Come down!" Or he was living again through the parting scene, and would cry, earnestly, "Love me always, Nora! Swear that, whatever happens, you will be true to me, and wait till I come back!"

And Nora, as she listened, would bend lower over him, until her soft, loving lips touched his brow, and not seldom a tear would fall upon his face. For it was sweetly sad to sit beside him, to hold him in her arms, though he knew her not, and through her throbbing heart there ached the knowledge that she could not hold him so long. The hour when consciousness would show signs of returning she would have to leave him forever. For, was she not the daughter of a convict, and not worthy to be the wife of any honest man, least of all the wife of Denis Dennison! So that, as, alas! is too often the case in this life of ours, her joy in having him helpless and surrounded by her love, and depending on her every hour of the day, was alloyed with the anguish of the coming parting. Now and again, at rare intervals, she would permit Dora to take her place; but it was only for a short hour or two. All her life and being seemed wrapt up in the sick man; and she would sit for hours holding his head upon her bosom, and bending over him, with that look in her eyes which women wear when the man they love lies utterly and completely helpless in their hands.

One day, one of the men picked up an opal in the plot of rock and sand, and, being Irish, and honest, brought it to Donovan. He looked at it shrewdly, and turned to Culmer, who stood by, leaning on a rough crutch.

Culmer nodded.

"Yes," he said; "it's worth money. But it's Mr. Denis's and mine. They can rob *me*, if you like; but it ain't the square thing to rob a man that lies next Death's door and can't prevent them."

Whereupon Donovan harangued "the boys," and took charge of all the stones they found. But temptation is a ticklish thing, and opals are fascinating, so he paid them off with a bonus and sent them, well contented, back to Melbourne.

The days passed, and gradually some of Denis's strength came back to him; and, with his strength, a measure of mental consciousness. One day Nora noticed a gleam of intelligence in the sunken eyes, and she rose and went out to Donovan, who was assisting Nora to cook the dinner.

"I want to speak to you, Donovan," she said. She was pale and trembling a little. "I—and Miss Moberley—must leave here."

"Sure—!" began Donovan; but she stopped him.

"We will take the horses and ride to the Walla Halla station. And, Donovan, I want you—I charge you—to say nothing of our having been here. Do you understand?"

Donovan scratched his head.

"Not to say—"

"That—that I have been here, or seen Master Denis," she said, red and white by turns.

Donovan thought for a moment, then his eyes grew sharp.

"An' no more ye have, Miss Nora!" he said, emphatically.

Nora was satisfied.

Next morning, she and Dora left the camp, and an hour afterwards Denis opened his eyes, and seeing Culmer bending over him, said:

"Time to get up, old man?"

Culmer, almost blinded by tears, and quite speechless, nodded.

"All right. Hallo! What's the matter? My legs and arms feel as if they'd got a weight tied to them. Help me up, Culmer! Ah!" For, suddenly, memory had opened her flood-gates, and the past poured back upon him in a torrent.

"Culmer! Those scoundrels! Where am I? The box?"

"All right, Mr. Denis. It's here!" said Culmer.

"And—Nora? Where is she?"

"What Nora?" asked Culmer, who had received his instructions.

"What Nora? Why, *Nora*! She was here—I'll swear it!" exclaimed Denis, excitedly, and raising himself on his elbow.

"All right. You lie down, lad," said Culmer, as calmly as he could. "You've been knocked about a bit; but—but you're pulling round. The box is all safe and sound, and—"

"But—Nora?" said poor Denis. "I saw her—heard her."

"She's not here," said Culmer, quietly.

Denis sighed and fell back, and piteously, with the tears in his eyes—for he was very weak—he muttered:

"It was only a dream, then!"

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## CHAPTER XXXVII.

YOUR ordinary villain, after such a *fiasco* as Spencer Foyle had made, would have thrown up the sponge and gone into hiding, would have sunk into the depths, never to emerge again; but Spencer Foyle was by no means the common or garden scoundrel; and, long before he had reached Melbourne, he had resolved upon his course of action, and had got his story and account of the incident in the bush carefully prepared. It was a beautiful account, and as simple as beautiful.

He and Tusker had been alarmed on the night of their arrival by seeing a light on the hill, and had gone up, quite innocently and unsuspectingly, to see what it meant, and had no sooner got to the spot than they were set upon by two men, one of whom had wounded Tusker. He and Tusker, however, had succeeded in overpowering them, and had secured one of the men to a tree, when the rest of the gang had come upon the scene. Tusker had been shot, and he, Foyle, had only escaped by a ruse and by the skin of his teeth. This was the story he meant to relate.

He had not seen the two women nor Donovan; but, even if he had, he would have met their accusation of attempted robbery and murder with cool effrontery. If he and Tusker had intended robbery, why had they not taken the box of gems with them?

He rehearsed this plausible account several times during the journey home, for he had been lucky enough to catch one of the fast vessels on the day of his arrival in Melbourne; and with all the confidence of conscious innocence he landed at Liverpool.

He bought several papers and some journals as he got into the train, and, leaning back, opened one of them gingerly—for his right arm was still in a sling. Presently he lit upon a paragraph which made him start, then smile with malicious satisfaction.

"Notwithstanding," it ran, "all the efforts made by her friends towards discovering the whereabouts of Miss Merton, the actress who achieved so sudden a success at the Duke's, no clue to her hiding-place has been gained. It will be re-



membered that Miss Merton disappeared one evening in a most mysterious fashion, it is presumed in company with her friend, Miss Moberley, of the *Empress*—for that young lady was also lost to sight at the same time—and the only explanation of the sudden flight was afforded by the fact that a rumour had sprung up to the effect that Miss Merton had been identified as the daughter of a well-known criminal, who had ‘served’ a term of imprisonment for complicity in the mysterious robbery of a bank official. It is said that she was recognised by a young lady of rank, whose parents reside in the village in which Miss Merton had been brought up, and that this young lady had lost no time in undeceiving the public and the fashionable world which had received Miss Merton into its most exclusive circles under the impression that she was the daughter of an English clergyman. By her sudden disappearance the public is justified in believing that Miss Merton took a passive, if not an active part, in this deception. Much as we regret the loss to the stage, we cannot but feel that society is well rid of a person who, on the most charitable view, must be considered an impostor.”

Spencer Foyle read this paragraph with an enjoyment which grew as he found out similar references to the “mysterious flight of an actress” in some of the other journals.

“That disposes of ‘Miss Olive Merton!’” he muttered. “I think we may cry quits now, my dear Nora! Yes, I think you would have found that it would have paid better to keep faith with me. Blanche has evidently done the work well,” he mused, as he ran over the paragraph again. “I couldn’t have done it better myself.”

Mr. Levison received him with astonishment and some dismay.

“Back already!” he exclaimed, as Foyle entered the gaudy dining-room. “Where’s the other—where’s *Tusker*?”

“*Tusker*’s dead,” said Foyle, coolly; and, as Mr. Levison fell back in his chair gasping and gaping, Foyle told the story he had concocted. It really sounded very pretty and romantic.

“Pore ole *Tusker*!” said Mr. Levison. “Vell—vell, we must all die, Foyle; an’ it’s a good job it wasn’t yourself, eh?”

“A remarkably good job,” said Foyle; “as it is, you see, I didn’t come off scot free,” and he touched his wounded arm.

"Not at all," said Foyle, as he sipped his wine. "I'll let you have the reports."

"But the men you took with you!" said Levison, almost breathless at his accomplice's coolness.

Foyle shrugged his shoulders.

"What does it matter? I missed them; they are back in Melbourne by this time. But I can say that I took a party of miners out, and the public can conclude, if it likes, that they are still there working the thing. Meanwhile, I'll trouble you for a small sum on account. We'll say five hundred."

Levison gasped still harder, protested feebly, but, overcome by the suddenness of Foyle's return and his calm assertiveness, handed him a cheque for the amount.

Foyle went straight to the bank and cashed it, and, with the notes in his pocket, had himself driven to Olansmere Gardens. There was no time to lose.

He was rather surprised when the servant told him that Lady Blanche was in, for he had expected to hear that she and the Earl had gone back.

"Lady Esdaile is here, too, sir," said the man.

Foyle went up to the drawing-room; Lady Blanche was lying full length on a settee by the fire, and she started to her feet as she heard his name—her face red, her eyes sparkling.

"You have come back—already!" she cried.

"I have come back, yes," he assented, holding her hand in his left.

"Oh, what is the matter with your arm?" she exclaimed, shrinking a little—for the sight and thought of pain was abhorrent to her, a thing to be avoided as a nuisance.

"I have met with an accident," he said. "It is nothing to speak of, and will be all right in a day or two. Indeed, I am only keeping the bandage on because I thought it would be interesting." He smiled; and Blanche, as she gazed up into his pale face, thought that he certainly did look interesting. "I will tell you all about it some day. For the present, it will suffice that I have succeeded in my undertaking, and I"—his voice dropped, and he took her hand again, as they sat side by side on the sofa—"I have come to claim my reward."

She flushed again, and cast down her eyes.

"I got your letter," she said.

He smiled. "So I saw by the papers when I reached England," he said. "Weren't you surprised?"

"That she was Nora Neil? Well, not much; for I recognised her, you know, though you almost persuaded me that I

was wrong. And I always had an idea that there was something shameful in her father's history. Those sort of people are always mixed up with crime, aren't they?" Her eyes grew hard and triumphant.

"And you sent the news to the papers?" he said, still smiling.

She nodded, her eyes flashing.

"Rather!" she assented, with a laugh. "I lost no time, and sent it that very day. It was my duty to expose an impostor, wasn't it?"

"Most certainly," he said, smiling to himself.

"Yes, that's what I said; but father was furious. We have scarcely spoken since. And mother is as bad. If you'll believe me, she insisted upon coming up to London and trying to find the girl. She is quite ill about it. One would think, to hear her talk, that the girl belonged to her, and that I'd done something dreadful in exposing her. Fancy an Esdaile making such a fuss about people of the Neils' class—the lowest of the low, and criminals to boot!"

Foyle looked thoughtfully at the fire.

"Lady Esdaile has always taken an interest in her, has she not?" he asked.

Blanche scornfully tossed her head.

"Oh, yes; an unaccountable interest. But I never did understand my mother. There has always been—been a kind of coldness between me and her—and my father, too, for that matter. They never understood me, I suppose. And now—now you've come back, I expect there will be more trouble." She hung her head, and blushed.

Foyle pricked up his ears.

"About me?" he said. "You think they will object to me as a son-in-law, Blanche? Why? I have no title; but I have a good position, and am no longer a poor man."

Blanche sighed, and slid her hand towards his.

"I don't quite understand what is the matter," she said. "But I think it all arose from a man called Sedley—the man who writes plays, you know."

"Yes," said Foyle. "I know him."

"Yes; and he—he says he knows *you*. He came here one day, after the paragraphs in the papers appeared, to see me, and father happened to be in. Mr. Sedley was very rude—he is a low, vulgar man!—and insisted that there was no truth in the story of Nora Neil's father; and dared to almost bully me for 'spreading it,' as he called it. And father as good as agreed with him!"

Foyle nodded.

"But where do I come in?" he asked.

"Oh, your name was mentioned! I think that Mr. Sedley imagined that you had something to do with the girl's disappearance. By-the-way, I wonder where she has gone?"

Foyle shrugged his shoulders.

"Does it matter?" he said, indifferently. "I haven't the least idea where she is. And so, Sedley thought—?"

"Yes; he said that you had hung about her—those were his words; and—and he told father a lot of lies about you. I'm sure they were lies!" She turned to him questioningly.

"You have never done anything wrong, have you?"

He smiled.

"A good deal, I'm afraid. But the worst is in daring to love one who is far above me in every way, dearest!" he murmured. A carriage drew up to the door, and Lady Blanche ran to the window.

"It is my mother," she said, looking embarrassed.

Foyle rose.

"I will go," he said. "Blanche, am I to hope?"

She cast down her eyes, and beat the devil's tattoo with the point of her rather large shoe.

"I don't know what to say."

And she did not. She was fascinated by Spencer Foyle, and, above all things, wanted to be married. Somehow or other, Lady Blanche, notwithstanding her florid beauty, had not made the success in London she had anticipated. It drove her mad to reflect that while Nora Neil—Nora Neil!—had received several offers, and one from no less a person than Lord Vernon, she, Blanche, had touched no man's heart—save Mr. Foyle's. She thought rapidly. Mr. Foyle was fashionable; he was now rich. But she knew Lord and Lady Es-taile would not consent.

"I know what is passing in your mind, dearest," he murmured. "But, Blanche, if you love me—and you do, do you not?"—she was silent, and he took her silence for assent—"you will not let any one, even your parents, come between us! They are prejudiced against me—why, I don't know; and I fear they would refuse to accept me as a son-in-law, if I asked them to do so. But, Blanche—*need we ask them?*"

He put the suggestion with insidious tenderness; but Blanche started, and coloured guiltily, for she had been thinking of the same thing—a clandestine marriage.

"Once we are married, and the thing irrevocable," he whispered, "they will yield. They cannot do otherwise.

Shall it be as I wish? Will you make me the happiest man in the world, Blanche? Quick; we may be interrupted!" he urged. "Will you meet me in the Park by the fountain to-morrow at this time? I may have to leave England almost at a moment's notice. Will you let me go alone?"

She started. She could not let him go—her only suitor; could not resist this chance of getting away from the parental yoke which galled her.

"Yes!" she whispered; and Spencer Foyle went away, smiling to himself.

The Esdailes would cave in, and accept an accomplished fact, after Blanche and he were married; and for their daughter's sake they would have to stand by her husband and protect him against any charges—absurd charges—of robbery and attempted murder. He and Blanche would make a runaway match of it, pass a pleasant time in seclusion on the Continent—he had Mr. Levison's five hundred to spend—and then return to kneel for forgiveness at Lord and Lady Esdaile's feet.

Five minutes after Foyle had left the room, Lady Esdaile entered. She was pale and sad, and she regarded Blanche coldly and almost sternly.

"Was that Mr. Foyle whom I saw leaving the house just now, Blanche?" she said.

Lady Blanche nodded without looking up from her book.

"I am sorry he has gone. I wished to see him," said Lady Esdaile. "I wanted to ask him if he could give me any information about—Nora Neil."

Lady Blanche frowned.

"I daresay he will call again."

"Much as I wish to learn everything I can, I trust he will not," said Lady Esdaile. "I will ask your father to call on him."

"What is there against Mr. Foyle? Why is it you are always so hard on him?" said Blanche, impatiently.

Lady Esdaile coloured with resentment at the impertinence of the tone.

"I know very little 'against' Mr. Foyle, Blanche," she said. "But your father has decided that the acquaintance must drop. But, at least, I know that it was this man who wrote to you that Nora was—was the daughter of a convict, and requested, or suggested, that you should communicate the fact to the papers. No man—I was going to say gentleman—with a spark of manliness in his nature would have acted so basely."

"And why not?" demanded Blanche, defiantly. "It is

true! Here was this—this girl—you don't know all the circumstances, you were not here—passing as a lady, as the daughter of a dean—a dean!" she laughed scornfully, "and being received by the best people and fussed over. One met her everywhere—and was quite sick of 'Miss Merton, Miss Merton!' She was an impostor! And it was right to show her up."

"I will not argue with you," said Lady Esdaile. "But, at any rate, Blanche, it was not your duty to reveal the circumstances of her birth, to cover her with shame, and hound her from the place she had won so hardly. Had you no womanly pity for her? Why did you do it?"

Lady Blanche sprang to her feet, and confronted, with flashing eyes, the refined, patient woman.

"Pity? Not a bit! I rejoiced in doing it! I'd do it again to-morrow, for I—hate her!" and with a bold laugh she swept past her mother, and left the room.

Lord Esdaile called at Foyle's room the next day. He shared his wife's anxiety about Nora, and, with Lady Esdaile, felt that this man could throw some light upon Nora's fate. Foyle saw him come down the street, and sent down "Not at home."

Lord Esdaile returned home. "The man was in; I could see it in the servant's face and manner. He knows something, but will not speak. Had we not better go home? Let us go home. I am—anxious about Blanche. I fear that she is meeting Foyle—corresponding with him."

Lady Esdaile's pale face flushed with shame.

"Oh! she would not do that! You wrong her!" she said. "But we will go home at the end of the week."

On the morning of the day on which they were to start, Lady Blanche sent down word that she had a headache and would breakfast in her own room. Two hours later, Lady Esdaile, entering the room, found a note addressed to her, and carelessly pinned to the table-cover. Instinctively she knew what it meant, and she took it, unread, to her husband. He read it aloud:

"Mr. Foyle and I are going to be married this morning. We knew it would be no use asking for your consent, but we hope that you will forgive us. After all, there is nothing against him; and, if he is only a commoner, he is rich. We are going to spend the honeymoon in Paris. Please write to the Grand. With love to you both,

"Your affectionate daughter,

BLANCHE."

The stricken pair looked at each other with sorrow and despair.

"It is the letter of a servant-girl—but no self-respecting servant-girl would write such a one. And yet—as she says," he added, bitterly, "she is our daughter—our daughter!"

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### CHAPTER XXXVIII.

"ANOTHER day and we shall see England," said Denis. He was leaning against the side of the Australian liner, smoking a cigar, and Culmer was seated in a deck-chair beside him. Denis had recovered, or nearly recovered, from his hurts, and the voyage had restored something of his strength and a touch of the bronze to his face. But Culmer was still pale and rather feeble, and the grim night's work at the opal hill had left marks upon him which would last as long as his life. His face was pallid and sunken, and he still limped, and walked with the aid of a stick. The man was aged and altered considerably; the rugged uncouthness had given place to a gentler manner, but his old taciturnity had increased. Between the two men a strong affection had grown up—an affection that had been strengthened and developed by the perils which they had passed through—and it was rather touching to see the expression which rested on Culmer's face as he watched or spoke to the younger man. The two, so singularly unlike, aroused a great deal of curiosity amongst the other passengers; and not a few of the young ladies on board had endeavoured to attract the handsome young fellow with the pleasant voice and frank smile. But Denis, though always attentive and polite, had no eyes for them. All his thoughts were for Nora, and though he was staring at the sky, at this moment he saw her face depicted on the clouds. A few short hours and he should see her—herself!

"Another day," said Culmer, with a sigh, "and then we part, lad."

Denis glanced at him affectionately.

"Well, only for a time, old man," he said. "We shall meet again soon, I hope. We won't lose sight of each other. Why, man, you and I will in all probability be paying another visit to the opal hill."

"Perhaps," he said; but he shook his head thoughtfully. "You won't stay in London, my lad?" he asked, after a pause.

"No," said Denis; and a faint colour came into his face and a light into his eyes. "Nor you neither, from what you said,

Culmer. We'll stay long enough to turn the stones into gold, and then—" He stopped and drew a long breath, and almost unconsciously whistled "The Girl I Left Behind Me." Culmer watched him wistfully. He had no idea where Denis was going, for neither Donovan nor Nora had, during their stay in Opal Hill, divulged Denis's full name, or mentioned Mari-shannon.

"You'll go home to—to—?" he said, hesitatingly.

"Yes," said Denis. "I shall go home to the girl I love with all my heart, old man—the girl who has been waiting for me. How slow we seem to be steaming! But that's my fancy only, I suppose!" He laughed rather shamefacedly.

"And you, too, are going home?" he said.

Culmer nodded. "Yes; though that's scarcely the word, for it's been no home to me. I am going to try and make up for the past, lad—to make up for years of desertion and neglect. God grant I'm not too late!"

"Amen!" said Denis, gravely. "That will be all right, old man! Don't go back on your luck! And what luck we've had! We're both rich, we've escaped robbery and murder. By-the-way, Culmer, *your* account with one scoundrel is squared—"

"Ay," said Culmer, solemnly.

"—But I've got to settle with the other, the man Foyle. When I've time"—he laughed shyly—"when I come back to London, and have time, I mean to hunt up the elegant Mr. Foyle, and square my account." He paused a moment or two, then he said: "The whole affair is a kind of mystery to me. I never quite understood how we got out of it, or why the men who came to the rescue cleared off before I came to and could thank them."

Culmer puffed at his briar.

"They were in a hurry," he said, laconically.

"I suppose so. Everybody seems in a hurry nowadays. It's time for your beef-tea, old man." Culmer required frequent nourishment. "Hi, boy! ask the steward for Mr. Culmer's broth." And when it came, he drew a small table to Culmer's side and waited upon him.

"Quite touching, such devotion!" murmured the young ladies, who spent a great part of their time watching the two men. "He waits on the old man hand and foot."

The liner steamed into Plymouth, and Denis, carrying the precious box, assisted Culmer to disembark and into the train. They reached London, and Denis insisted upon putting up at the Metropole.



"We're rich men," he said, laughingly, "and now we'll have the best dinner the place can show; and then—why, we'll look up dear old Sedley. How surprised he will be! London at last! Culmer, there's no city like it. Next to—a little out-of-the-way spot in the country, I love it better than any other place in the world."

He was in the best of spirits through the dinner, and, with their cigars alight, they called a cab and went down to Sedley's chambers.

A gruff "Come in" responded to Denis's knock, and he burst into the room with a boyish "Hallo, there!"

Sedley was sitting at his belittered table, as of old, and, as of old, he looked up as if he were emerging from some other world; but as he recognised Denis, he sprang to his feet and uttered a wild whoop.

"You young dog! Where have you sprung from?" he cried, gripping Denis's hand and staring at him. "Lord! what a man it's grown! Come in—sit down. No; stand up and let me look at you. Hallo, Culmer! Glad to see you! You—er—don't look first rate."

"Culmer's been seedy," said Denis, quickly; "but he's getting all right now."

"*That's* all right! Bless my soul, how glad I am to see you! Hi, boy! H-i, b-o-y!" he yelled; "a bottle of whisky from Short's! Say it's for Mr. Sedley; and some soda-water. Look sharp, or I'll rid the world of a monster at last! Sit down, both of you."

He swept a couple of chairs of their impedimenta, and Culmer sat down and leant upon his stick; but Denis marched about the room, looking round him with the enjoyment of a traveller returning to a familiar scene.

"Just the same—just the same. Seems as if I hadn't been away for a week. Hah! what's that?" and he turned to a theatre poster of Sedley's last play.

Sedley blushed. Would that some of the actors and supers he bullied at rehearsal could have seen that blush!

"Guilty, my lord," he said. "Been writing for the theatres, my boy, and have hit 'em. 'Great success! One hundredth night!' and the rest of it."

Denis wrung his hand.

"I'm not surprised," he said. "Everybody knows that you're a genius. Tell us all about it."

"Not much! Tell me all about yourselves and—and the diamond mine."

"Opals! opals!" said Denis. He lugged the box from

under Culmer's chair and unlocked it. "How's that for high, Sedley? We brought it round to show you. In fact, one of us is going to carry it about with him until we turn 'em into bank-notes, which we hope to do to-morrow."

Sedley stared at the glittering gems, as well he might.

"Then—then you've struck it, you're rich?" he said.

"Rather," laughed Denis. "Eh, old man?" and he clapped Culmer on the back—Culmer, who sat quietly looking on and smiling.

"And you'll hurry down to—what's the name of the place—and square the uncle, eh?" said Sedley.

Denis grew grave and thoughtful in a moment.

"Yes," he said.

"All right. But you won't go to-night," said Sedley, "and therefore to-night is mine. Tell you what, we'll sup at the 'Worcester Cheese,' eh? Just wait while I correct these proofs. Ah, here's the whisky! Fill up, gentlemen! Here's luck! Oh, but you've got that!" and he nodded at the box. "Here's future fortune!"

They drank to future fortune and adjourned to the old hostelry. They sat in the same spot, beneath the portrait of Doctor Johnson, and the same waiter shuffled forward to attend on them. And through the plain but appetising supper they talked. That is, Sedley and Denis. Culmer sat and listened, smiling his now gentle smile.

"Well, you'll have to make a book of it, that's certain," said Sedley.

"Oh, you make the book," retorted Denis; "or, better still, write a play, as you have gone in for that sort of thing. I always knew you'd strike oil, Sedley. How I should like to have seen one of your dramas; and I will, too!"

Sedley smiled modestly, then sighed. "Yes, I've had my good luck, and I have had my bad, too," he said.

"How, bad?" asked Denis, as he leant back with his leg over the end of the old-fashioned settle, and a cigar between his lips.

Sedley pulled at his blackened briar.

"Oh, it's too long to tell you," he said, with another sigh. "But I can sum it up. I discovered an actress, my boy. A girl with the face of an angel—bah! we know how they draw angels!—better than that. The face of a *live* woman; and they're not so common as you think, my boy! She made a hit in a couple of plays of mine; pulled one—the last—through by her genius, and then—and here's where my bad luck comes in—she disappeared."

"Really? Poor old man!" said Denis, with comfortable sympathy. "As good fish in the sea as ever came out of it."

"A beastly proverb!" said Sedley, with disgust. "No proverb that ever was invented is worth its salt. For instance, there is *no* fish in the sea as good as the girl I have lost. She was 'Eclipse, and the rest nowhere!'"

"Who was she?" asked Denis.

Culmer leant back and smoked his long clay in silent content. He was happy in contemplating the happiness of Denis.

"Oh, her name—her stage-name was Merton—Olive Merton," said Sedley. "She was a kind of mystery. A lady—by instinct if not by birth and training—and, as I have said, a genius. She could make 'em laugh and cry—well, just as she liked. I counted upon her for this new play of mine, but, by George!—here, waiter, fill up again!—she cuts and runs, and disappears as cleanly as if the earth had opened and swallowed her."

"And no reason given?" said Denis, trying to express sympathy in the tone of his question.

Sedley growled.

"No. Well, yes. The fact is—I'm boring you both?"

"Not a bit," said Denis. "How could anything concerning you bore us, old man? Fire away!"

"Well, it seems that there was a mystery about her antecedents. Of course, it is the dodge to make one, but in this case there was one. It was said that my Miss Merton was the daughter of a dean. She behaved as such, and actually got into society. She did, indeed! Then one day she cut and run, and shortly afterwards there appeared a paragraph in the society papers—oh, isn't there any power on earth to spifficate them?—that my Miss Merton was the daughter of a convict!"

Denis whistled. Culmer knocked the ashes from his pipe and filled again.

"Yes; bad, wasn't it? I suppose the person who sent the information to the papers threatened her with it, for she flew before it. Of course there was a woman in it. It was a woman who started the thing and gave the papers the tip."

Culmer cleared his throat.

"What was the name?" he asked.

"Fawsett," replied Sedley. "The newspaper people say that he was concerned in a robbery from the person of a Belgian bank clerk."

Culmer rammed the tobacco down into his pipe.

"Oh!" he said, phlegmatically.

"Yes," continued Sedley, with the sigh of a man with a

grievance, "that's what they say. Be it true or false, she has fled, disappeared, and I am heart-broken. Yes, that's the word, for I liked her. I *liked* her!" he repeated. "There was never a truer, sweeter woman on earth than Olive Merton. She had supped with me the day before she disappeared, and—" He stopped.

Denis looked at him sympathetically.

"Poor old Sedley! But never mind, old man; you'll find another as good."

"Never!" said Sedley. "You talk like a boiled owl. You've never seen her! Look here; I'll show you a photograph of her. I had it taken by a confounded amateur; it's a snap shot, as they call it. She would never be photographed by the regular people. Here it is. But it doesn't do her justice."

He took out the voluminous pocket-book which men of his calling always carry, and from one of its numerous compartments drew out the photograph.

"There she is; and I would give a thousand pounds if she stood before me in the flesh—bless her!"

He threw the photograph on the table, and Denis took it up with friendly interest and curiosity.

But no sooner did his eyes rest on it than he uttered an exclamation and half rose from his seat. Then he fell back, his eyes glued to the portrait.

"Beautiful, isn't she?" said Sedley, who ascribed Denis's emotion to simple admiration. "Oh, but it doesn't do her justice! You should have seen her when she was acting!"

Denis drew a long breath, and still staring at the portrait, passed his hand across his eyes.

"Let me look," said Culmer. Neither of the other men noticed the dry, constrained tone in which he put the request.

Slowly, reluctantly, Denis handed him the portrait.

He looked at it long and earnestly, and as he looked, a puzzled frown lined his forehead. "A pretty face," he said, as he handed the photograph back to Sedley.

"Pretty!" exclaimed Sedley, disgustfully. "Why, she is *beautiful*! There's not a more lovely woman on earth. It's the idiot of an amateur photographer that hasn't done her justice. And there was never a better actress. And I've lost her. Well, well, I've bored you long enough. Another whisky? Here's luck to you both. You'll look me up again before you leave the Little Village? If I can help you to dispose of your booty, command me, you know. And you'll certainly have to make a book of it, Denis."

silence, in her attitude, kept him more effectually than any words could have done from crushing her to his heart. His arms fell to his sides, and he gazed at her with ardent love, with tender surprise and reproach.

"Won't you speak to me, Nora?" he said. "Why—why do you stand there as if—as if I were a stranger? As if—oh, my God!—you were not glad to see me, had—had forgotten me!"

Her voice came at last, the voice he had been thirsting for.

"I—am glad," she said; but the dear voice was dry and constrained. "I—have not forgotten; but—"

"But what?" he demanded.

As he spoke, he looked at her, half-conscious, in the moment's stress and strain, of the change in her. The dress was the same. But Nora had altered. Her beauty had developed, ripened; it was not the beauty he had remembered, but the loveliness of a lady: he could think of no other standard. It was gold refined and chased; the country flower had bloomed into the exquisite delicacy of an exotic. A new and strange light shone in the dark eyes, the light which culture, a trained imagination, an enlarged understanding and artistic perception had kindled.

In a word, he had left Nora—beautiful enough, but a peasant—and he returned to find her transformed into a lady.

"What has happened?" he said, his eyes anxiously scanning the exquisite loveliness of her face. "Did you expect me—you seem so little surprised?"

She winced, for her heart ached at the distress in his voice. And Heaven only knows what it cost her to refrain from throwing herself into his arms.

"Yes, I expected you," she said; "and I knew you would come back. And—ah, Denis! I am glad—glad!"

As she spoke his name, he held out his arms again; but she did not fall into them.

"Have you forgotten your promise?" he said, hoarsely. "Have you ceased to—care for me? Is there any one else? Great heavens! are you going to tell me that you do not love me—that—that—"

Her eyes closed for an instant, as if the strain were more than she could bear.

"Denis!" she said, and her voice shook and broke. "Will you listen to me? No, do not—don't come nearer. Don't make it harder for me! Think me worthless, faithless—Ah, no, don't—don't! But, Denis, you remember that promise? I swore that I would never be any other man's wife—"

"Well," he said, bluntly, "and didn't that mean that you would be mine? Why should you promise that if you didn't intend to marry me when I came back. Nora, what does this mean?"

She sank on to the boulder and hung her head. He saw her lips moving, and a kind of awe fell upon him: for when women pray, my brother, we must stand aside, lest we stand between them and the angels.

"Don't—don't cry; for God's sake, don't cry!" he said, hoarsely. He looked round as if he could scarcely believe that he was awake. What! he had come back to clasp Nora in his arms, and here she was, holding him at arm's-length, and praying, and crying for fear he should touch her.

"Ah, you don't know!" she said, with a kind of despair. "Denis—much has happened since you left."

"I know!" he said, eagerly. "I know that you are a famous actress. You shall tell me all about it presently. I heard it from Mr. Sedley. He worships you."

The colour rose to her face; she looked up at him with anguished suspense.

"And—and what else did you hear, Denis?" she whispered. Then he understood. The blood rushed to his face in response.

"You mean—?" he faltered.

"That my father—" she began, but could not go on. Her head drooped until her eyes were hidden in her hands.

Denis was silent a moment, his heart aching with pity and longing.

"Yes, I heard that."

"And it is true," she said, almost inaudibly. "I am the daughter of a common criminal. There is the prison stain upon me—"

He uttered a cry.

"Hush! Hush, Nora! Not upon you! *You*, so pure, so good, so sweet! No, not upon you. And if it were"—his eyes flashed, and his breath came fast—"it could make no difference! I love you, love you; and I claim you for my wife!"

She rose, trembling, and looked at him with something in her eyes which made him cry out. The next moment he had caught her in his strong arms, had swept her off her feet, so that, in very truth, she lay upon his breast.

She suffered the caress, his passionate kisses which fell upon her face and hair, for a moment or two—indeed, she was overwhelmed; then she put her hands on his breast and strained

back from him, her face deathly white, her breath coming pantingly.

"Let me go, Denis! You—you are mad! You forget who—what I am!"

"You're right; I am almost mad, and you have driven me mad! Do you think a man travels thousands of miles to see the woman he loves better than his heart's blood, and can stand being told that after all—after all his fighting and struggling—and, worse, his *waiting*!—he's not to have her—do you think he is going to stand it *quietly*? Not much!" He laughed fiercely. "Come back to me! What do I care who or what your father was? I don't want to marry him, but you—but you; and, by Heaven, I mean to!"

There is no better way of winning a woman than this; but Nora stood firm.

"Oh, Denis, Denis!" she whispered. "If I might—if I might! But I must not! Don't speak, dearest. Yes, I love you, you know that; and it is because I love you—"

"—That you'll drive me mad!"

She was about to speak again, to urge him to leave her, when she glanced upwards, started, and held up her hand.

"Hush! There is some one there—listening. A man. I must go—"

"Who cares? Let him listen! All the world may hear for what I care!" said Denis, hotly, and without even glancing up to see where she was looking.

"Hush!" she said, gently, but trembling. "He is going to the cottage; my mother is ill—too ill and weak to see any one."

She turned from the beach to the path, with her old light step, and Denis followed her. At the bend of the path she stopped and pointed upwards. "Go, Denis! Your way lies there!"

"I beg your pardon!" he said, slowly and grimly. "My way lies by your side. No, Nora, I shall not leave you. Go on."

With bent head she hastened on, and he followed still. At the cottage door he came up to the man.

"Culmer!" he cried.

Culmer looked at him, the pale face reddening slowly.

"Mr. Denis!" he said.

"Why—what? Then it is *you*—!" He paused, struck dumb by the knowledge which flashed upon him.

Culmer bent his head with a kind of helpless humility.

"Yes," he said. "Go in—and—and prepare her."

"Mrs. Neil, you mean?" said Denis, still staring.

"Yes," said Culmer, humbly. "It's her I've come to see. Denis, lad—she is my wife."

Nora had stood looking from one to the other, her eyes dilating.

"*It is my father!*" she said.

Culmer raised his head for a moment, and looked at her—a strange, puzzled expression in his eyes.

"Are—are you—?"

"I am her daughter—she is my mother; yes," said Nora, with white lips.

Denis took her hand. It was cold as death. She tried to draw it away, but he held it firmly.

"You are her father, Culmer!" he said, very quietly. "And she is my promised wife! Great Heaven, and I never guessed—never saw! Hush, Nora, not a word! This is my sweetheart, my wife, Culmer! You will give her to me?"

Culmer looked from one to the other with a troubled gaze; but before he could speak, a faint voice came from the cottage, calling Nora.

She went towards it, but Culmer held up his hand.

"She has heard me," he said, solemnly. "I will go in."

With bent head he passed into the cottage.

Nora and Denis heard a cry, and Nora broke from him and ran in. He followed in time to see Culmer catching his wife in his arms.

"Hush, hush, Janey! Don't be afeared. It's me—me, your husband," he was saying.

Nora, on her knees beside the chair, hid her face in her arms. Denis took a step towards her, but he felt that any attempt to console her would be worse than useless, and, wisely, he went outside and stood out of hearing.

Now, it happened that just as Denis was turning away from the Hall gates, Lord and Lady Esdaile were driving round the corner of the road. Since the day Blanche had dealt them her heartless blow, Lady Esdaile, with the true instinct of a wife and mother, had drawn nearer to her husband; and the pair were seldom apart. She walked over his beloved farm with him, sat with him in his study, and insisted upon his accompanying her on her drives and walks. They never spoke of the undutiful daughter who had repaid their love and care with such base ingratitude, but they often sat silent side by side, and Lady Esdaile's hand would steal into his, and remain there, with mute but eloquent consolation in its touch.

As the carriage came within sight of the gates, Lady Es



daile saw the young man leaning there, and something familiar in his figure struck her; then she caught a glimpse of his face and uttered a cry of surprise and pleasure.

"Gerald!" she said. "Look! That young man! It is Denis Dennison!"

Lord Esdaile started, and put up his glasses.

"Yes, it is!" he said. "Denis come back! Poor Larry, this will be a happy day for him. He looks seedy and anything but prosperous; the old story of the prodigal, I suppose," and he sighed.

"Poor Denis!" she murmured. "But, oh, look, Gerald! He is turning away!" she exclaimed, with distress. "He is not going in!"

Lord Esdaile shook his head.

"Ashamed to go, I'm afraid!" he said.

"What shall we do?" said Lady Esdaile. "What shall we do, Gerald? He may be afraid, ashamed to go to the Hall, as you say; he may leave the place again!" and in her eagerness and pity she began to tremble.

"That mustn't be!" said Lord Esdaile. "I suppose he has only just come by the coach, and Dennison doesn't know of his arrival."

"He must be told before—before it is too late!" she said.

"Let us go to him, Gerald. Oh, let us go at once!"

He nodded gravely, and told the coachman to drive up to the house.

Lord Larry was just going up to dress for dinner, but when he saw who were in the carriage, he came into the hall to meet them, with his hand extended, and the old smile upon his handsome face.

"Come in!" he said, heartily. "Faith, I was just thinking of you, and wondering whether you'd take pity on a solitary man and come and dine with him." He stifled a sigh as he spoke, but they both saw the sadness behind the smile.

"We'll dine with you with pleasure," said Lord Esdaile.

"Stay to-night, then!" he said. "Never mind ceremony and evening-dress. Just say you'll stay. Persuade him, Lady Esdaile!"

"We will stay—perhaps," said Lady Esdaile. She was trembling a little still, for she did not know how he would take the news they had brought. He led the way into the drawing-room, and as they sat down he looked round rather wistfully.

"I'm afraid you'll find the room strike rather cold and grim," he said. "I seldom come into it. The fact is, I've

been sticking to my shell rather of late; and I'm getting a regular old hermit. It's the way with men when they're all alone in the world. To tell you the truth, I've thought of letting the Hall, and going abroad; and I would do it, too, if it wasn't that I'm afraid to face the trouble that would arise from the pack of servants and retainers, as they call them. Faith, they retain me!" He laughed.

"You miss Denis?" Lady Esdaile murmured, rather quakingly.

The handsome face grew pale, and the lines deepened with the frown. There was a silence for a moment, then he said, with forced calm:

"You're right. I miss him! It's a thankless and ungrateful world, Esdaile. We give our hearts and all we have to our children—he was like a child of mine—and they turn on us." He broke off as he saw Lady Esdaile pale and her eyes fill with tears. "Forgive me, my dear!" he said, penitently. "I—forgot! You, too, have suffered."

"But—but was it altogether Denis's fault, dear Lord Larry?" she said, in a low voice.

He flushed.

"Yes, it was," he said, stoutly. "Why didn't he apologise to that fool of a fellow? He insulted him. But, not satisfied with that, he runs him through, and nearly does for him. And serve him right!" he blurted out, with an almost comical glance at them. "Yes, I could forgive him for that, for, by George, I'd have done the same!"

"What is it you cannot—you *think* you cannot forgive?" asked Lady Esdaile.

"Why, his taking me at my word!" he responded, with that Irish inconsistency which is so delightful and refreshing in these logical times. "Why didn't he wait till I'd cooled down? What the devil did he mean by turning his back on the old man who had been a father to him; aye, and loved him better than some fathers love their sons?"

"He did it because he, too, was a Dennison," said Lord Esdaile, with the shadow of a smile. "Did you ever know one of your name kneel and sue for pardon?"

"Never!" said Lord Larry, fiercely. "Why should he! I mean— But why hasn't he written—just a word, to say how—how he was getting on?"

"Because he was not 'getting on,' and, being a Dennison, was too proud to say so," said Lord Esdaile.

"How do you know?" asked Lord Larry, and he looked from one to the other. Something in Lady Esdaile's face

made him turn red, and then pale. "You've—you've heard something of him!" he said, huskily.

Lady Esdaile struck while the iron was hot.

"We have just seen him."

Lord Larry started, and looked round as if he expected to find Denis behind him.

"Where—where?" he said, hurriedly. "Is he coming? Why doesn't he come? Denis!" And he went towards the door, but stopped, as if half-ashamed of his generous impulse.

"He is not here, and—and I am afraid he is not coming," said Lady Esdaile, in a low voice.

"Why not—why not?" he demanded. "Where did you see him?"

"At the park gate," said Lord Esdaile; for something in Lord Larry's voice, the cry for Denis in it, brought a lump to Lady Esdaile's throat, and rendered her speechless. "He stood there for a little while looking in, poor lad! Then he turned away."

"Turned away!" Lord Larry's head dropped. "He turned away! And—and—how was he looking?"

"Shabby—and poor," said Lord Esdaile, frankly.

Lord Larry raised his head, and stood for a moment repeating the words, "shabby and poor." Then he said, brokenly, "I—excuse me—I must go and find him. Denis—my boy—come back shabby and poor! We Dennisons have always been poor, but we've never been shabby. We've always fought the devil with good clothes on our backs! Oh, my poor Denis! I must go and find the lad!"

"Yes," said Lady Esdaile, softly; "before it is too late."

"Too late? What do you mean? That Denis would turn away, and go off again! Stay there! No," he thundered; "come with me! Both of you! He'll cut up rough, or I'll lose my confounded temper. Come, my dear, and help me find and keep him."

He hurried out; then remembered his manners, and came back, with a murmured, "Forgive me!" to hold the door open for her; and they left the house. Some of the servants had caught a word or two of the conversation, and were crowding timidly into the hall; but Lord Larry did not seem to see them or notice their excited whispering, but passed out, with his face working, his eyes set straight before him.

They went down the avenue, and reached the lodge as Dr. Reilly's old-fashioned gig drove by. He pulled up, and raised his hat.

"How do you do, my lady? It's fine weather. What an

evening for the trout, Lord Esdaile! I was just getting my rod, when a gossoon came to fetch me for Mrs. Neil. Nora's sent to say she's worse." He shook his head. "I'm thinking Nora's come back only just in time. Why—is anything the matter?" For by this time he had noticed their agitation, and he looked from one to the other with his keen glance.

"Denis has come back!" said Lord Esdaile.

"Denis! Hooray!" he cried, his kindly old face lighting up. "Faith, and that's the best piece of news I've heard for a long time. Where is he? I'll come up to the Hall, by your leave, Lord Larry, directly I leave the cottage."

Lord Larry winced, and Lady Esdaile hastened to say, in a low voice:

"Denis is not there. We are looking for him. We are afraid that—that he may go again."

The doctor nodded, and thought for a moment; then a cute look came into his sharp eyes.

"Draw the Lake Cottage or the beach!" he said, significantly; and, whipping up his old grey mare, drove on.

"What did the old devil mean by that?" said Lord Larry; but Lady Esdaile coloured as if with sudden comprehension.

"Yes, let us go!" she said; and she hurried on in front of them.

They went quickly down the road, and turned in at the gate.

Denis had just shaken hands with the doctor as he passed into the cottage, and had seated himself on the stump of a tree—on which, by the way, he and Nora had often sat, as children, with their arms round each other's waists—and he heard the click of the gate and looked up absently, for his thoughts and his hopes and fears were with Nora inside the cottage. Then he saw the three, and sprang to his feet.

Lord Larry stopped dead short at sight of him, and looked him steadily, took in the fact of the shabby coat, the travel-stained hat, the anxious face; then, with a broken cry of "Denis! My lad, my lad!" he had got hold of his hand with one of his own, while the other fell upon Denis's shoulder and patted and stroked it.

"Uncle!" said Denis, the tears springing to his eyes.

And that was all he could say. They stood for a moment or two looking into each other's faces.

"And what the devil are you doing here, Denis?" exclaimed Lord Larry, when he had found his voice. "Why didn't you come straight to the Hall? Boy!—you did not intend *not* to come?" and his voice began to thunder.

"No, no, sir!" said Denis, quickly; "I was coming right enough. But—but—there was Nora; I had to see her first."

At another time the old lord would have burst into a passion of objurcation. But he was afraid to do so now; but he looked surprised and hurt for a moment; then he mastered himself.

"Oh, ho!" he said. "That's where the wind lies! Well, lad, it's your affair, and I won't interfere. Only come back. Come back—and—and—all shall be forgiven!"

Denis wrung his hand again.

"Are—are—you hungry, Denis?" asked the old man, in a whisper, and glancing round as if he were afraid of being overheard.

Denis stared. "Hungry!" Then he understood that the old suit had played its part effectively. "Well—rather, sir."

Lord Larry put his hand on the young man's shoulder.

"Then come away! Dinner's ready—and there's company."

He looked round for the other two, and the Esdailes came forward and welcomed Denis warmly.

"Ah, now, come!" said Lord Larry, impatiently. "You'll find your room ready for you. They've got an inkling of your return, Denis, and there'll be a high time of it at the old place to-night. Come, all of you!"

"One moment, sir," said Denis, in a low voice. "I must see Nora; I—I cannot leave her for awhile. There's trouble in there," and he looked towards the cottage.

"Ah, yes, yes, I forgot," said Lord Larry. "The mother's bad, poor woman—"

"I will go in," said Lady Esdaile, softly; and she left them and went in.

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## CHAPTER XL.

MR. SPENCER and Lady Blanche Foyle had a splendid time of it in Paris. There is a lot of spending in five hundred pounds—especially if you let your bills run and take all the credit which tradespeople are eager to extend to any one with even the appearance of respectability—and the young people ruffed it in the City of Light pretty considerably.

It was a round of pleasure from day to day, and Blanche was as nearly happy as a woman of her nature can be. She had everything she wanted and hungered for: a husband who was good-looking, with charming manners, and a "tone" which the English colony in Paris were quick to recognize and

acknowledge, and who was apparently devoted to her; any number of dresses, a large assortment of jewellery, and an endless list of gaieties. She was looking at her best just at this time—because she was in a good temper—and she met with a great deal of admiration. It filled her with delight to see opera-glasses levelled at her when she entered their box at the opera; to hear people whisperingly asking who she was; and she began to look forward to the time when, restored to her parents' favour, she could "swell it," as she called it, in London, as she was doing in Paris.

And Spencer Foyle himself was in a good humour. He was not in the very least in love with his wife, but he played the part of an adoring husband to perfection, and continually congratulated himself on his astuteness in securing an alliance with the Esdailes. That the "old birds," as he called them, would eventually take her back into favour, and acknowledge him, he had not the least doubt; and so he was smiling and amiable, and gave himself up to the high old time which he felt he had earned by his privations in the bush, and his cleverness in getting himself out of a hole which might have proved very deep and dangerous. They had rooms at the Grand—rooms on the first floor—a brougham, a lady's-maid, and a valet. They gave nice (and expensive) little dinners to the fast circle into which they had got; and they were voted a charming young couple by their friends, and regarded by the authorities in the hotel and the tradespeople they patronised, as wealthy English people whom it was an honour—and a profit—to serve. From time to time Foyle heard from Levison, whom he had supplied with rich and glowing reports of the Great Hill Gold Mine; and that worthy sent him proofs of the prospectus, and glowing accounts of the prospects of the undertaking.

Foyle had heard nothing of the "affair" on the opal ground, and concluded that, for reasons of their own, Denis and Culmer—if Culmer was still alive—had made no move; and he did not trouble himself about the business. He was quite at ease, and quite confident.

So they sailed along the stream of Parisian life. It was the old story of Youth at the prow, and Pleasure at the helm; and to Blanche the way seemed lined with flowers and lit by a sun that would remain in the heavens for just as long as she needed it. After a time, the bills began to drop in. Foyle, however, was not anxious or distressed; he could make another draw on Levison. But he thought that it would be as well, perhaps, for Blanche to communicate with her parents.

"You haven't heard from papa and mamma, I suppose?" he remarked, quite casually, one morning.

They were seated at breakfast by the open window, the luxurious midday meal in which the Parisians delight. The sun was shining through into the handsome room, upon the silver and glass on the table, and the rings upon Blanche's rather large fingers.

She looked up and shook her head.

"No," she replied, with a shrug of her shoulders. "They are still grumpy and sulky, I suppose. So absurd of them, isn't it? As if it was any use, now we are married!"

He smiled.

"I daresay they are a little annoyed," he said, pleasantly.

"Annoyed!" Blanche laughed. "Father was mad, I've no doubt."

He frowned slightly.

"Well, I fancy they've had time to get over it," he said.

"You haven't written to them, have you?"

"No," said Blanche, helping herself to some fruit from a huge *épergne*, and leaning back in her chair with indolent content. "No, I haven't. I didn't think you wanted me to."

"Hem!" he said, thoughtfully. "Perhaps you'd better send them a line or two. You know the kind of thing."

"Oh, do I? I'm not so sure. I'm a bad hand at letter-writing. I never could say what I wanted, and I never could spell."

"I don't think the spelling matters," he said, lighting a cigarette, and sipping his liqueur. "Just say the usual thing; that you can't be happy until you have obtained their forgiveness and all that. And if you can manage to drop a tear upon the paper, well, all the better."

She laughed.

"It wouldn't take either of them in," she said. "They wouldn't believe in my tears. But I'll write if you want me to, though I warn you that they may not come round so easily as you may fancy. Papa's as hard as nails when his back's up; and mamma can be pretty stern and obstinate when she likes."

He shrugged his shoulders. "There was no need to hurry or worry."

"Better write," he said, carelessly. "We may want to go back to England, and they could put us up for a time. Yes, better write."

"Very well!" she said, with a stifled yawn. "What are we going to do to-day? I'm going shopping with some peo-

ple; and there's a lunch at St. Cloud. You'll come, won't you?"

He nodded.

"Yes. Going shopping, are you? I should have thought you'd bought all you wanted—judging by these." He touched a pile of bills which lay beside his plate.

She laughed.

"Oh, I want a lot of things—especially if I'm going to England. What's the use of having money if you don't spend it?"

"What, indeed?" he assented, pleasantly; but she did not see the faint curl of his lip or the expression of his eye. "But don't buy too many things, or you'll find the packing and luggage a nuisance."

"Oh, my maid—and your man—will see to that," she said, carelessly. "You won't be late for the lunch, will you?" As she passed him, she laid her large hand on his head and ruffled his hair playfully. It was one of many little tricks which, by their vulgarity, jarred upon him; but, though he swore under his breath, he smiled and nodded at her pleasantly. It was too early to remove the mask.

"I shall have to take you in hand presently, my dear Blanche," he murmured to himself, as he smoothed his hair. "Going shopping, is she?" He took out his pocket-book and regarded the by no means large number of bank-notes which remained. "Yes; I shall have to trouble Levison for another advance," he said, as he rose and rang for his hat.

Faultlessly dressed, with an expression of serenity and prosperity on his face, he went out into the sunlit streets, and sauntered in his languid fashion to the club to which he had been admitted as a visitor, and, calling for a cigar, took up an English newspaper. He looked it over listlessly, and was about to throw it aside, when the heading of a paragraph arrested his attention.

"Failure of a well-known financier," was the double-headed line; and under it was an account of the failure and flight of the famous Levison. A "corner" in which Mr. Levison had been heavily concerned had collapsed, and that conspicuous ornament of the City had been ruined. It was a complete burst-up; and, with the "corner" itself, had exploded all the other schemes which Mr. Levison had in hand. His flight was accounted for by the fact that certain shady transactions which would not bear the close inspection of the law had come to light. It was not a very long account, but Spencer Foyle gazed at it for quite a quarter of an hour.



He did not go to the luncheon, but returned to the hotel, and Blanche, when she came back from her party, found him, in his shirt-sleeves, packing a by no means large portmanteau.

"Why didn't you come?—and what on earth are you doing, Spencer?" she exclaimed.

"Packing, my dear," he said, and he looked at her over his shoulder with quite a new expression on his face—that is, new to her.

"Packing! Why, where are you going?"

"We are going to England, my dear," he said. "Shut that door, will you? Thanks!"

"To England! But why so suddenly? And what's the use of that stupid little thing? Why don't you let Alphonse pack the imperials, and properly?"

"Because Alphonse—and your maid—have gone for a holiday," he said, "and this will hold all we shall be able to take."

She stared at him with astonishment.

"I don't understand!" she said. "What nonsense this is!"

"Isn't it?" he retorted, with a hard smile. "Of course you don't understand, and I'll hasten to explain. Have you written that letter?"

"No."

"I'm glad; because it will be better to take them by surprise. We must go straight to Ireland, and play the penitent daughter for all it is worth. Get into a plain travelling dress as soon as you can, and bring me a few—mind, *as few*—things as you can do with. We shall have to smuggle this portmanteau out of the hotel."

"Smuggle? Are you mad, Spencer?"

"No," he said, grimly. "But I soon shall be if you don't do as I tell you—and I'm not nice when I'm mad."

Something in the frank brutality of the speech forewarned her. "Something has happened?" she said, faintly.

"You're right!" he said. "It has happened that I have learnt that I am ruined!"

"Ruined!" she gasped.

"Don't shout, please; and mind my hat; you nearly sat on it."

He lit a cigarette, and resumed his packing.

"Ruined! How? Tell me! I'm—I'm frightened, Spencer!"

He smiled.

"I thought you would be," he said. "It's in a nutshell. The man I was working with has gone broke, stone-broke, and has taken to his heels. Change that dress, please!"

"Then—then—you are not rich; you have deceived me?"

"Yes," he said, smiling at her. "You have put it in a phrase. Now, run away, and do as you're told, that's a good girl. There's no time to lose."

"You—you mean to—to run away without paying!" she faltered.

"How keen an intelligence you possess, my child," he said, with a sneer. "That exactly describes my intentions."

She rose, white to the lips, but with an ugly flash in her eyes.

"You—you villain!" she panted. "I—I know now why—why you married me!"

"I don't think you do quite," he said. "It's too complicated for you to grasp all at once, my dear. Do go!"

"I—I will not go! I will not move! I will stay here! Why should I go with you?"

He shrugged his shoulders, and laughed.

"Well, if you ask me, I will give you two excellent reasons: First, because you happen to be my wife; and, second, because the hotel manager and the tradespeople will prosecute you as an adventuress who has aided her husband in procuring goods on false pretences."

"You are an adventurer," she said, drawing herself up, and regarding him scornfully. "But you forget—I am the daughter of an earl."

"Of course," he said, pleasantly. "That's why I married you, my dear Blanche."

Her face flamed, and her hands clenched; she was incapable of retort.

"Come, my dear girl," he said, "be sensible! Why should we quarrel and fling nasty things at each other! I'm in a hole, a devil of a hole, and you are in it with me, of course—for better or for worse, you know! Be sensible, and face the music as I do. We'll go to papa and mamma, and beg forgiveness. I've just about enough money to take us over comfortably. They'll cave in, and take their beloved daughter to their bosoms. I'm not so sure about the same performance for the son-in-law; but I've no doubt the fatted calf will be killed, and all will come right. Don't—let me beg of you not to!—stand there with your mouth open. If you knew how plain that kind of expression makes you! Run and get your things. We'll tell them we are going to stay with your friend, the Princess—by-the-way, I've discovered that she is an adventuress—going to stay the night, and will only want this little portmanteau. See? We'll give the man the order

to drive to her hotel loud enough for the waiters and the rest to hear, and then change our minds and go to the station. Come! Make up your mind. Will you go with me, or remain and face the hullabaloo which will be raised when they discover that I've bolted and left no money behind?"

She went to the window, and stood for a minute, her bosom heaving with humiliation and fury. Then, without a glance at him, she left the room.

They—or rather Foyle—carried out his plan quite admirably. His serene and smiling face, his languid drawl, would have removed any suspicion of flight, if the fact that there were several imperials, packed with costly purchases, still in the room, had not sufficed to do so. The explanation of monsieur and miladi's visit to Madame la Princesse accounted quite sufficiently for the presence of a portmanteau; and the pair left the hotel through a line of bowing waiters and porters; and it was not until they were safe in the railway carriage that Blanche broke down, and, cowering in her corner, gave way to tears of mortification and anger.

All through the journey to England, Foyle retained his cynical, languid manner; but on the night they started for Ireland, he grew sharper and more alert.

"We will cross to-night," he said. "There is no time to lose. You'll have to play your part carefully, my dear. More depends upon it than you can imagine. You've brought a black dress, I see. That's all right. As for your face"—he smiled—"you look wretched enough to touch the stoniest-hearted father!" Blanche did not retort. She had taken refuge in a sullen silence. For she had learnt that not even her bitter tongue could say anything which could touch the cold and heartless villain with whom she had cast in her lot, and for whom she had deceived and deserted her parents. They reached the nearest station to Marishannon, and Foyle succeeded in obtaining a post-chaise.

"I fancy, if this fellow gets the best out of his wretched nags, we shall reach Esdaile before dinner," said Foyle. "There will not be time to kill the fatted calf, to say nothing of cooking it; but we must postpone that savoury dish. Have you thought of what you will say and do? I trust it won't be necessary for me to play the penitent too strongly; for, to tell the truth, I am not in the humour for much of that kind of thing."

Blanche drew away from him into her corner, and made no response.

They reached Esdaile, and the butler came forward—to stop

dead short and stare for a moment at the white, weary face of his young mistress.

"Miss Blanche!" he gasped.

"Ah, how do you do?" said Foyle, genially. "Is Lord Esdaile at home?"

The man recovered his usual gravity.

"No, sir. My lady and he are dining at the Hall."

Foyle bit his lip and hesitated. The butler signed to one of the footmen to take down the portmanteau; but Blanche stopped him with a gesture.

"I will not go in while they are away," she said, bitterly, and in a whisper to Foyle. "They—they may not—I don't want to be turned out."

Foyle smiled cynically.

"Not risk it, eh! Very well!" He turned to the butler.

"We'll go to the Hall," he said.

They drove to the Hall in silence. As they got within sight of the entrance, Foyle saw something was astir. The servants were grouped in the hall and were chattering excitedly.

"What the devil is going on?" he muttered. "Ah, Cronin, how do you do? Is his lordship at home?"

"Sure, an' it's yer honour! An' Lady Blanche!" said Cronin. "An' just come in time! There's good news, sor! Master Denis is back—long life to him!"

Foyle was staggered for a moment, and his face dropped.

"Good news, indeed, Cronin!" he said, with a forced smile. "Do you hear that, Blanche? Denis Dennison is back!"

Blanche, as she stood on the step beside him, shrank from him, and her face flushed for a moment.

"An' his lordship, an' Lord an' Lady Esdaile are down at the cottage, bringin' of him home!" said Cronin. "You'll come in, sor? Come in!"

Foyle hesitated. Denis back, and at the cottage! What was going on there? He glanced at the post-chaise thoughtfully, for flight was his first instinct; but the sight of the tired and sweating horses showed him that flight was scarcely possible. He must face the business.

To give the man the credit due to him, it must be admitted that he was no coward.

"We'll walk down to the cottage and join the party, Cronin," he said. "It will be a pleasant surprise on all sides. Come, my dear."

She shrank back slightly, and her face went a shade paler.

"Come!" he said, in an undertone. "Pull yourself together. They are looking at you and wondering what the devil's the matter! Come along!"

She hesitated for yet another second or two; then walked away by his side. As they passed down the road, he said, quietly:

"Luck seems to be against us. I didn't count upon a public performance of our little comedy. Anyway, you will have a gallery to play to."

"Another word, and I will not go!" she said.

"Oh, yes, you will," he retorted. "My dear Blanche, you cannot help yourself. There is nowhere else to go. Your father must take us in, or—"

He stopped, for they had reached the bend of the path at which they could see the clearing in front of the cottage, and he saw the three men standing there.

"I think I'll let you go on alone," he said. "My presence will only embarrass you. If all goes well you can call me. I will remain here in modest seclusion. Luck go with you, my dear wife!"

He sat himself down at the foot of one of the trees and leant back, the eternal cigarette between his teeth; and Lady Blanche, with a parting look of scorn and hatred, went on.

As she reached the cottage the three men had slowly walked some hundred yards away. Their backs were turned towards her, and Blanche, after a moment's hesitation—she shrank from the meeting with her father—entered the cottage.

Mrs. Neil was lying back in her chair, Culmer was standing beside her, Nora was kneeling with her face hidden on her arm, and Lady Esdaile was bending over her with her hand on Nora's head.

As Lady Blanche stood and gazed at them the colour rose to her pale face, and an angry, jealous light began to burn in her dull eyes. For a moment no one saw her, for they were all intent upon the dying woman; but Mrs. Neil, opening her eyes, saw her, and uttered a faint cry.

At the same moment, Blanche took a step forward towards Lady Esdaile. "Mamma!" she said, huskily.

Lady Esdaile started and turned to her, and murmured her name.

"Blanche! You here?" she said, with agitation.

"Yes," said Blanche. "I—we—have come home—"

She got no farther, for Culmer, who had been regarding her intently, and with a dazed expression, uttered a faint, troubled exclamation.

"Who is this, Janet?" he whispered to Mrs. Neil, hoarsely.

His wife had been staring vacantly at Blanche until now; but at his question a look of intelligence came into her eyes, and she turned her head away and moaned.

"Will you not come with me, mamma?" said Blanche, impatiently. "I have followed you here. I am tired."

Lady Esdaile held up her hand.

"Speak softly," she said. "She is very ill, Blanche?"

"Then leave her to her daughter and her own friends. Who is this man?"

Lady Esdaile coloured painfully at the insolent tone of the question. She was trembling with the emotion caused by Blanche's sudden appearance, and seemed scarcely able to stand.

"It is Mrs. Neil's husband," she said, in a whisper.

"Oh, the convict!" remarked Blanche.

Nora, who had only raised her head for an instant, winced and cowered; and Lady Esdaile, as if the insult were levelled at herself, went and bent over the cowering girl, and put her arm around her.

"For shame!" she said. "Go outside, Blanche. I—I will come presently."

Blanche, with a scornful stare at Nora, was about to obey, when the three men approached the cottage, and she drew back again.

"Don't—don't send her away, my lady," said the faint and feeble voice of the dying woman. "Let her stay. Her place is here—here, with her father and mother."

No one spoke. All eyes were fixed upon the face on which the shadow of death was already falling.

"It is my daughter, Blanche," said Lady Esdaile. "Do you not know her, Janet?"

Mrs. Neil sighed heavily, and struggled for breath.

"No," she said; "not yours. Here is your daughter;" and she moved her hand slowly until it touched Nora's shoulder.

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## CHAPTER XLI.

"HERE is your daughter!" said Mrs. Neil, and her hand stole to Nora's hair and slowly, gently, stroked it. There was an intense silence. Dr. Reilly came in from the adjoining room, where he had been mixing a restorative, and, before he administered the draught, he paused, and looked from one to the other with keen eyes.

"Is she wandering?" Lady Esdaile asked, in a tremulous whisper; but it was Mrs. Neil herself who answered her.

"No, my lady. I am in my senses; I know what I am saying." She breathed painfully. "Lady Blanche is my girl. I exchanged her for yours—"

Lady Esdaile shrank back with horror and incredulity on her face. Lord Esdaile, with the instinct of an honourable man, stepped across the threshold, and stood beside Blanche, who turned to him with a harsh cry.

"She is mad!" she said.

"No," said the dying woman, "I am not mad. I know what I am saying. *Here* stands your father—not *there*. Look at him—can't you see—see for yourself—that I am speaking the truth?"

They all looked, first at Blanche, and then at Culmer, who stood with his hands clasped on the back of the chair, his head bent; and as they gazed in stony amazement, the resemblance between the two was borne in upon them. Illness had softened the ruggedness of Culmer's face, and the likeness to the girl's—as she stood, white and terrified—was undeniable.

"*I—her* daughter! It is a lie! Do you know who he is?" she panted. "He is a thief, a low thief. He has been in prison—he is a convict—"

"Hush!" said Mrs. Neil, with sudden energy—the draught had restored something of her waning strength. "Whatever he may be, he is your father. It is *you* who are his daughter—not this one. Look up, Nora. Look at her. Is she like me or my husband? And look at the other. Their—their voices are the same. Speak, James!"

Culmer could not obey; he opened his lips, but no word would come.

"Why—why—if this be true—did you do it?" cried poor Lady Esdaile.

Mrs. Neil looked at her sadly.

"Why not?" she said, with the calm indifference of the dying. "Why should my child, who had done nothing to deserve it, carry a load of shame through all her life—that's what I thought as the baby lay in my lap and smiled up at me. It was innocent, innocent! And yet I knew that during all its life, the disgrace and misery of its father's shame would cling to her. It wasn't just or right; and I brooded and brooded over it until the thought came. The devil tempted me to put my child in the place of yours; to make it safe, to give it riches and a title—" She paused for breath, and Dr. Reilly raised her head.

"A lie! She's lying!" said Blanche. "You don't believe it?" She turned to Lord Esdaile with passionate adjuration. "You *can't* believe it! I am your daughter—you know it! It is a plot, a conspiracy, they have hatched amongst them. What could you expect? A convict! That girl"—she pointed a shaking hand at Nora, who, white and breathless, clung to the chair—"is capable of anything—anything! She is an impostor already; and this—this—"

Mrs. Neil moved her head from side to side, and moaned.

"Stop her," she said. "Don't—don't let her go on. Have pity on her, my lady. It is hard for her to bear. Doctor! Is the doctor here?"

Dr. Reilly touched her.

"I am here, Mrs. Neil," he said. He was very grave, and his face absolutely impassive.

Mrs. Neil looked up at him as if her sight were failing.

"You—you remember? When—when my child was born there—there was a mark—it was like a scar—upon her shoulder—"

He started slightly, and his lips came together closely.

"There was," he said, in a low voice.

"A mark that would last with life itself," said the hollow voice. "See—see if it's there now!"

Blanche uttered a low cry, and shrank back.

The doctor looked at her, then turned his eyes away. Lady Esdaile covered her face with her hands. They all felt as if they *saw* the mark as plainly as if the wretched girl had bared her arm. No one spoke for a full minute. Of all who had listened and watched, the Esdailes themselves were most convinced. There might still be doubts in the minds of the others—there was none in theirs.

Lady Esdaile sank into a chair, and looked from one to the other in helpless misery. Suddenly Culmer came from his place and stood beside Blanche.

"*She's* done no wrong," he said, hoarsely. "*She's* innocent. It's not her fault that she's my daughter."

Blanche started away from him; but he went on:

"I knew it—I guessed it—the moment she came in. I saw the likeness—though none o' you did. It was seeing her sudden-like, I suppose—and a kind o' feeling here." He touched his breast, and his eyes grew moist. There was a pause, and then he put his hand timidly on her shoulder.

"Don't—don't be afraid, young lady," he said, in a thick voice. "I'm—I'm not going to claim you. I shan't ever trouble you. I'm leaving Ireland when—" He glanced



towards the dying woman. "Only—only I ought to tell you that—that—I'm well off, and able to—to provide for you. I'm rich. You needn't take my word for it—ask Mr. Denis there—"

Denis had entered, and had got Nora's hand within his, and her face was hidden on his breast.

"Ask Mr. Denis. He'll—he'll answer for me. All I have is yours—"

The doctor held up his hand.

"Hush!" he said, as he bent over Mrs. Neil. She opened her eyes, and looked towards Blanche.

"Forgive! Forgive!" she gasped.

Blanche glared at her speechlessly for a moment; then, with a cry of passionate refusal, she darted from the cottage as her mother fell back dead.

"Oh, go to her—go to her—poor girl!" murmured Lady Esdaile.

Lord Esdaile went out hurriedly, and Lady Esdaile seemed about to follow. Then, as if she remembered suddenly, she turned and looked at Nora.

They looked into each other's eyes as if they were searching the other's heart for a mother's, a daughter's, love; then Lady Esdaile's white face moved, broke up, as it were, and she held out her arms with a low cry.

"My child!"

Nora was enfolded in them; and, as her head sank upon her mother's bosom, only Lady Esdaile heard the sweet voice sobbing, "Mother! Mother!"

Blanche tore up the path, half mad with fury and humiliation, and as she came to the spot where Spencer Foyle was hiding, he stepped out to meet her. She stopped and looked at him pantingly, her face white to the lips. He regarded her with a smile of cruel amusement and contempt.

"You—you have heard?" she gasped.

He nodded, and raised his eyebrows.

"Yes, every word."

"It is a lie—a conspiracy!" she said, leaning against a tree, and wiping her face.

"No; it's true enough," he said.

"You dare—!" she exclaimed, fiercely.

He laughed softly.

"My dear child, the thing's as plain as a pikestaff! Why should the woman—I beg your pardon!—your mother—lie? And just dying, too! For shame, my dear Blanche—if that is your name—one gets a little mixed, doesn't one?"

"You—you believe it?" she said, trembling with shame and tortured pride.

"Yes," he said, "there's no doubt about it, I'm sorry to say. For, you see, I come in here as an injured party; for I've had the misfortune to marry Blanche Fawsett, the daughter of a convict, instead of Blanche Esdaile."

"Oh, my God!" she moaned. "What shall I do? What shall I do?"

He laughed, and laid his hand on her shoulder.

"If you ask me, I should say—make the best of this thing."

"The best?" she said, with bitterness.

"Certainly," he said, coolly. "It isn't so bad as it looks. You can still claim to be Lady Blanche Esdaile—I'll take very good care you do, by-the-way!—and you can, at the same time, enjoy the benefit of being the daughter of Mr. Fawsett, *alias* Culmer, and *alias* anything else."

"The benefit?"

"Yes," he said, smiling. "My dear Blanche, the man must be something approaching a millionaire. He is the owner of an opal mine—half owner, I should say; for that hound, Denis Dennison, is his partner—and the man who owns such wealth as he possesses is not half a bad father to hang on to."

"I would rather die than touch a penny—I!"

"Would you? How tired of life you must be! Come on, and take my arm; we will walk on. Now, I'd rather die than *not* touch it! My dear Blanche, how often must I beg you to be sensible? The man's rich—enormously rich."

"A convict!" she gasped.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Who cares? No one rakes up the past of a millionaire. Money gilds the blackest jail-birds nowadays. He doesn't know what to do with it—he is eager to lavish it on his newly-found daughter. My dear wife, we will let him lavish it. Can you walk a little quicker? I've reasons of my own for avoiding a meeting with my dear papa-in-law. I'll tell you some day. Meanwhile, we'll get to the Hall and take the post-chaise back to the station. We shan't be missed, I assure you. You can write from London, or see your papa there. Anyway, you will have to acknowledge him and play the dutiful daughter."

"Never! never!" she said, passionately. "Why should I?"

He looked at her with a smile, but a smile that made her tremble and shrink from his arm.

"Because I have the misfortune to be your husband, and command you to do so!" he said, quietly.

When Lord Larry and Lord Esdaile, with Denis, reached the Hall, leaving the two ladies and Culmer at the cottage, they found that Mr. and Mrs. Spencer Foyle had already departed.

The three men sat and talked late into the night, they each had so much to say. But it was mostly of Blanche they spoke.

"Strange as it may sound to you, the discovery was no surprise to me," said Lord Esdaile, in a low voice. "There have been many times and occasions on which I have felt that the poor girl was no child of ours, and my wife has confessed to the same feeling. And for Nora, she has always had what was an inexplicable, but is now an easily explained, liking and sympathy. Just before Nora's flight, my wife came home from a painful scene at the cottage—it was about Donovan's offer—which very nearly revealed the truth to us. God knows how sweet the truth is! And it is all the sweeter for the fact that we shall gain a son as well as a daughter," and he laid a hand on Denis's shoulder. "How strange it is that they should have fallen in love with each other! We talk of chance, Larry; we should refer these mysterious coincidences to a higher source, and with awe and reverence!"

"We have always loved each other," said Denis, simply.

"Well, well!" said Lord Larry, after a torrent of exclamations. "We'll make them happy, eh, Esdaile?" and he nodded cheerfully. "We're neither of us too flush, Denis, my boy, but we'll set you up between us! Anyway, there's a home here waiting for you, and another at Esdaile; you'll have to take turn and turn about! And as to pocket-money, why, I daresay we can spare some of the timber."

Denis coloured, and looked guilty.

"I've—I shall have a small income of my own, sir," he faltered, uncomfortably.

"Eh? Oh, you're meaning your mother's money? It's small indeed! But never mind—we'll manage," and he nodded over his glass.

"I wasn't alluding to that, sir," said Denis, inwardly quaking, for the old man had just filled his—Denis's—glass, and was putting it into his hand with quite the air of succouring the needy. "I've had a piece of luck. I found a good friend in Culmer."

Lord Larry nodded.

"Oh? Well, I daresay he's not as bad as he made himself out."

"No, no! Indeed, no!" said Denis.

"I liked the look of the man. He may be—what they called him; but he hadn't the cut of the—the—ahem! Yes, I was taken by him, I'll admit."

"You might well be, sir," said Denis. "That man—Ah, well, it's a long story. But Culmer has made a rich man of me, uncle."

Lord Larry set down his glass, and turned pale, and then red.

"What the devil do you mean, sir?" he demanded.

Denis looked at Lord Esdaile as if for help, and then blundered on:

"You heard Culmer say he was rich? So he is, fabulously. He owns an opal mine—"

"A what mine?"

"An opal—gem—mine; that is, half of it; for the other half belongs to me."

Lord Larry gasped and stared, his anger rising rapidly.

"Then you mean to say that you're not poor, not down on your luck? What the devil—!"

Lord Esdaile leant forward across the table and laid a hand on his arm.

"He never said he was, Larry! It was I—"

"Said! No! But look at his coat—look at his hat—look—look—!"

"That's all right, sir," said Denis, hastily. "I was in such a hurry to get down to Marishannon that I hadn't time to buy new things—and—oh, dash it! I must tell the truth! I knew that if I came looking hard up and seedy you'd take me in, and forgive and forget."

"Right, Denis; he would!" said Lord Esdaile.

"Hold your tongue!" roared Lord Larry. "You've both deceived me!"

"Well, no, not quite," said Denis. "Because, after all, I'm poor enough, seeing that all the money will belong to my wife—Nora Esdaile!"

It was a lucky stroke. Lord Larry stared at him for a minute, then the storm cloud passed from his face, and he held out his hand.

"Confound the boy!" he said, "that's beaten me! And so—you're a rich man! Well, you're the first Dennison that's ever been able to say so! Are you sure?"

Denis pulled out his pocket-book, and shyly put the notes on the cloth.

"That's only an instalment," he said. "There's plenty more where that's come from."

"But one half is that fellow Culmer's?"

"My mate, and partner, and *friend's*? Yes," said Denis, quietly.

Lord Larry whistled softly, and looked at Lord Esdaile.

"Then, *both* the girls will be rich!" he said, in a low voice.

"Cheer up, Esdaile; it might have been worse! But—but you've robbed me of a pleasure, Denis. I was going to kill the fatted calf. You've nearly broken my heart. Well, I'll forgive you!" and he shook hands again.

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## CHAPTER XLII.

ONE day, while London—one might almost say the world—was ringing with the story of Lady Nora Esdaile's restoration to her rightful place in society, and dilating upon her short and marvellous stage career, Denis walked up to Esdaile.

Since Mrs. Neil's death, Nora had, of course, gone home to her newly-found parents, and had lived there in such seclusion that Denis himself had seen but little of her.

For Nora had not yet got quite used to her own identity as the daughter of an earl; and the shadow of the old, false parentage still hung over her, though daily it grew fainter and less sombre.

And, too, the shock of Mrs. Neil's death had been no slight one.

So that, on the few occasions Denis had seen her, she had, so to speak, rather held him at arms'-length. Lady Esdaile, with a mother's insight, understood the phase of feeling through which her daughter was passing, and had begged Denis to be patient; but Denis, being only a stupid man, had found it rather difficult to exercise that Christian virtue.

However, he did his best to hold himself in, and refrain from "worrying" her. But one day Donovan came home. He had found it rather difficult to tear himself away from London and the Empress, where a certain Miss Moberley was again delighting crowded audiences; but he found it possible to run down at last. He had business with Lord Esdaile, he said. And before many hours, Denis, snatching at an allusion to Australia, had got out of him the story of the rescue.

Denis scarcely waited for the full details—but dashed up to Esdaile, and demanded, rather than asked, to see Lady Nora.

She came down to him, looking too lovely for words, but with a grave smile.

"How do you do, Denis? Mamma will be here in a minute or two—"

"Thanks; but I don't want to see Lady Esdaile this morning, Nora," he said, with his old directness. "I want to see you. Will you come into the garden?"

She hesitated a moment, then passed out, taking up her hat as she went.

"I have just left Donovan," he said. She started slightly, and her face grew pink, then went pale again.

"Yes? I hope he is quite well?"

"Thank you; quite well. He wouldn't be, if I had served him as he deserves. I ought to have given him a good hiding. Nora, why have you deceived me?"

"Deceived?"

"Yes! It was *you* who saved me from Foyle. It was *you* who saved my life. The second time! It wasn't a dream; for you *were* out there in the bush when I was ill!"

"Forgive me, Denis!" she murmured.

"I don't know," he said, cunningly; for love makes us cunning sometimes. "I'll try to, before I go away—"

"Go away!" She stopped short, with dismay writ all over her.

"Yes," he said. "I am going back to the opal mine. It seems that I'm not wanted here."

"Not—wanted!"

"No; who wants me?"

"Why—why, Lord Larry—my father—my mother—"

"Thanks! Any one else?"

The crimson stole over her face.

"Yes; Denis," she said, a little piteously, "I, too."

"Then marry me!" he said, promptly.

"I—I will—some day," she said, faintly.

"Name it!" he said, with business-like briskness.

"Oh, Denis!"

"And, oh, Nora!" he retorted. "Do you think I haven't waited long enough? Do you think I'm not flesh and blood—but only stone! Why, I'm—I'm half out of mind with longing for you. And I don't see you. But never mind! All I say is, what was the use of going all those miles to save my life if you worry me to death afterwards? Name the day, Nora!"

"Must I?" she whispered.

He could play the "stand and deliver" no longer, but caught her in his arms ("Oh, Denis, the windows!" notwithstanding) and kissed her passionately. And the day was named.

\*     \*     \*     \*     \*

As Lord Larry said, "One can't be mourning forever," and the wedding, which Nora would fain have had a very quiet one, was anything but quiet.

It was, indeed, so large and festive that both the Hall and Esdaile were crammed with the guests, which not only comprised the usual relations, but the friends of the Miss Olive Merton who had shone with such effulgence on the boards of the Duke's Theatre.

There was a—literally—full account of it in the *Cornet*, for Mr. Sedley was present, and made the most eloquent speech at the breakfast; and the list of the guests comprised most of the stars of the fashionable, literary, and dramatic world; but not even the graphic *Cornet* could describe the splendour and gaiety of this truly Irish wedding.

As Dora said, it was like a scene in one of Mr. Sedley's plays—only more so; and the two "points" in the affair neither she, nor many others, will ever forget—the beauty of the bride, and the magnificent string of opals which shone and scintillated on her neck. They were not amongst Denis's presents, nor were they on view with the others some days before the ceremony; but they arrived the night before the wedding without a word from the donor.

But Denis and Nora both guessed from whom they had come, and both of them, while the words which made them man and wife were being spoken, saw a bent figure limp into a corner of the church, and limp out again before the service had concluded. It was Culmer. He had declined Nora's urgent invitations to join the guests; but he had stolen in to snatch a glimpse of his partner's happiness.

Of the breakfast, of the speeches in the hall, the merry-making in the park, the general "beno," as Dora called it, space will not permit a description. But it should be stated, in fairness to that gentleman, that, next to the bridegroom, Donovan seemed the happiest man there. Perhaps it was owing in no slight measure to his having a place found for him at the table near the bridegroom; or, perhaps, it was because he sat next Miss Moberley. Anyway, his handsome face, lit up with hilarity, made him a general favourite, not only with his neighbours and friends, but of the London guests—from Lady Marchmont downwards; and his glowing countenance reached its zenith when, just before the departure of the bride and bridegroom, he managed to whisper, in as low a voice as was compatible with the din of excitement: "Master Denis, I've done my business with his lordship! We're to have the Meadow Farm, Master Denis—good luck to him!"

"Wel" said Denis, with feigned innocence, but looking at Dora, who actually blushed.

Donovan chuckled, and struck his thigh as if it were the best joke in the world.

"Sure, and I'm maning my wife as is to be—Miss Dora here!"

Dora laughed, and got behind Nora.

"As if I'd give up the Empress for twenty Meadow Farms! Don't believe him, Mr. Dennison!"

But, to the infinite grief of many of her admirers, she did; and, stranger still, makes an admirable farmer's wife!

\* \* \* \* \*

Nora and Denis spent some of their honeymoon—the latter part—in London; and it was not the least enjoyable of that delectable period; for it is pleasant to share one's happiness with one's friends, and Nora Dennison discovered that she had a host of them. The Lady Nora was made as much of by Society—with the capital S—as Olive Merton had been, and her crowd of courtiers had by no means diminished. She and her husband did not, however, confine themselves to fashionable entertainments; and the little suppers and outings with Mr. Sedley and other "professional" friends were perhaps enjoyed more keenly than the most brilliant receptions at which Nora was the acknowledged queen.

At some of these cosy little affairs, there was present a white-haired, sad-faced old man, who sat very silent, and rather absent-minded, excepting when Nora spoke or looked his way; then his rugged face would grow bright, and an affectionate, wistful expression would come into his eyes. No one knew anything more of him than his name, but all of them liked the silent, self-contained man to whom Denis Dennison and his wife were evidently very much attached.

One evening, Denis and Nora were walking from their hotel in Piccadilly to one of these suppers. It was a beautiful evening, and so warm that people were driving from the theatres in open carriages and hansoms.

As our happy pair stopped at the edge of the pavement in St. James's Street to let the carriages pass, one of them pulled up just in front of them.

Nora uttered a faint cry, and pressed Denis's arm; and, looking up, he saw Spencer Foyle and his wife seated in the carriage. They were in evening dress; Blanche, richly and handsomely attired, with diamonds—and opals—sparkling at her wrists and on her neck. It was evident that, though ashamed of her father, she did not disdain to share his wealth.



But there was no light in the eyes to match that in the gems she wore so liberally, and the face was pale and weary. Discontent and the wretchedness of an unloved and unloving wife spoke from every line of it.

As her listless glance fell upon Nora, she uttered an exclamation, and caught at her husband's arm. They heard him curse her under his breath, and saw him shake her hand off. Then he saw them.

For a moment he shut his teeth close, and a look of hate shot from his eyes; but instantly it disappeared, and, with a cynical smile, he raised his hat and bestowed an exaggerated, mocking bow upon them.

"Poor Blanche!" murmured Nora, under her breath.

The gaudy carriage, with its powdered servants, moved on, and Denis, with Nora's arm pressed still more closely to his side, went on to their party.

It was at the restaurant where Sedley and Nora had supped on the night she had learnt that Denis had gone to Australia; and they sat at the same table, with another joined on, for Sedley had got quite a little party together. There were the managers of the Duke's and the Empress, Miss Temple and Miss Yorke, Johnson, the stage-manager, and Culmer.

It was a delightful supper; and Nora enjoyed the talk of "shop"—theatrical people, like those of the law, always talk "shop." It was like old times, and recalled the days of her triumphs, to hear the gossip of the green-room, and the prospects of the new plays and new actors; and she looked from one to the other with rather a dreamy smile on her lovely face.

"I suppose there is a good deal of excitement about Dora Moberley's benefit, Flexton?" said Mr. Walford presently.

"Oh, rather!" said the manager of the Empress. "You see, she was very popular. Confound that Irishman for running away with her!"

Denis laughed, and Flexton coloured and looked rather embarrassed.

"I beg your pardon, Dennison; though, by George, I expect Walford has 'confounded' you often enough for the same reason."

"Indeed I have!" declared Walford, with his courtliest bow to Nora. "The stage never suffered a greater loss than it did when Miss Merton left it."

Nora smiled and blushed.

"I haven't heard about Dora's benefit," she said.

"Well, it's only just been started," said Flexton. "We thought her many admirers and the public would like to give

her a send-off, and the profession—she is very much liked, you know, by all of us—”

“Indeed, I know it!” said Nora.

“Yes, the profession will be glad to help towards buying her a handsome present.”

Nora leant forward eagerly.

“That is delightful!” she said. “And it is to be soon?”

“Well, yes; it ought to be before the wedding. I believe—in fact, Mr. Donovan—by-the-way, what a splendid low comedian he would have made, eh, Johnson?—informed me that they were only waiting for your return to Ireland.”

Denis nodded. “That’s so. We’re going to give them the biggest thing in weddings that you ever heard of.”

“Except your own,” said Walford, with another bow.

“The profession is very keen about it, and we have had offers to play from all the prominent actors and actresses. What we want to do is something out of the ordinary run. Can you suggest anything, Walford?” said Flexton.

Walford knit his brows in proper stage fashion; he could not eat a piece of toast without giving the action the proper dramatic effect.

“Er—not beyond the usual thing,” he said. “You can only give them a *mélange*, a good variety, you know. If you could get some big performers, something really big, you know, that would help boom the thing.”

“Hem—yes!” said Flexton. “Whom do you suggest?”

Walford mentioned the names of several famous actresses and actors. Then, suddenly, he glanced at Nora, who sat attentive and deeply interested. He glanced at her, then at Flexton, and back again at Nora.

“What is the matter?” she asked.

For she was a woman, and keen-eyed, as we know.

Mr. Walford coughed, the stage cough of hesitation.

“Out with it!” said Sedley, with his usual abruptness.

“No ‘meet-me-on-the-Rialto-and-I’ll-tell-thee-more’ business, Walford. We can see you have an idea. Don’t let the novelty of the visitation overcome you, old man!”

“My dear fellow,” said Walford, with beautiful humility, “I *have* an idea; but it is too stupendous an one, so—so—er—audacious, that I’m afraid to voice it!”

“Then write it down on a piece of paper,” mocked Sedley.

“Well!” said Walford, as if driven at the sword’s point.

“If you must—and Lady Nora will pardon me!—it is—this: That we humbly beg and pray Miss Olive Merton to appear for the benefit of her friend, and for one night only!”

Nora sank back and turned crimson. Then a faint smile began to play about the corners of her mouth, and she stole a shy and timid glance at her husband. Denis was taken aback for a moment or two. Then he laughed, and looked at her with such love and pride that Culmer's sad eyes blinked.

"What—what would your father and mother say?" asked Denis.

"Then *you* don't object, Dennison?" said Flexton, eagerly.

"N—o," said Denis; "not if my wife does not."

"And you, Lady Nora?" they asked, in a kind of chorus.

And, as if they read the answer in her eyes, they began to clap their hands.

Culmer cleared his throat.

"I—I"—he said, in his timid fashion—"I should like to take some seats."

"Oh, no, you don't! You'd take the whole theatre, Mr. Culmer. We know you!" laughed Walford.

"Yes," said Culmer, meekly; "but I needn't sit in the whole of it!"

\* \* \* \* \*

What a house it was! What fabulous prices had been paid for even the lowest-priced seat! There was Royalty in a box, Society—with a very large capital S—not only in the stalls and dress-circle, but in the upper boxes and the pit. And the people; will it ever be understood how it was made possible to cram them in, or how they could have remained jammed together, good-humouredly, through that long night's entertainment?

It was varied enough even to please the most ardent admirer of variety; but the two items of that monster programme were the song and dance of Dora herself, and the "snow scene" in which Olive Merton had won her first and last success.

There was a great reception for Dora, but the immense crowd reserved their greatest enthusiasm for the moment when the slim figure of Olive Merton, in its worn dress, emerged from the wings; for the moment when the white and lovely face was raised, with its thrilling sadness, to the eyes of the audience which had waited and waited for a sight of it.

In a side box, Nora's father and mother and Lord Larry looked down at the girl they loved—and at Denis by their side, Denis, pale with pride and love—and could scarcely believe that this was their Nora.

And she played the wonderful scene with greater force and

more pathetic charm than ever she had played it before. There were tears in plenty; and they still shone in the eyes of men, as well as women, as they rose to shout and cheer, and wave their handkerchiefs as Mr. Walford led her on to receive the spontaneous tribute rendered by a vast and warm-hearted audience, not only to the great actress, but to the woman.

Those cheers will echo like marriage bells through all the rest of Nora's life, and in her memory those tears will glow with a brilliance which not even the opals from the now famous mine can outshine.

\* \* \* \* \*

Some months later, there was a house party at the Hall. Lord Larry's parties had always been very enjoyable, but since Lady Nora had become the mistress of the old place, they ranked amongst the events of the shooting season.

One afternoon, just before tea-time, that cosy hour when the men come in, wet and a little weary, to find the kettle singing over its lamp, and the women-folk looking domesticated and demurely smiling over the teacups, a visitor was announced—a Major Warner.

It proved to be our old friend, who had attained his majority, and, alas! that peculiar wisdom which follows a youth of foolish dissipation. He was looking rather old, not a little grey, and much thinner than when we saw him last.

Lord Larry received him with Irish cordiality, and, when he heard that the Major was on sick-leave, and was searching for his lost health in Ireland, insisted upon sending for his portmanteau.

The Major took his cup of tea from Nora's hand; but did not recognise her in the very least. Indeed, it was not until after dinner, when the gentlemen had lured some of the ladies into the billiard-room to play pool, that he seemed inclined to remember the squabble with Denis, and the resulting duel. It was evident that he bore no malice.

But, as he reclined in the cosiest of cosy chairs, and sipped his gin and seltzer—your gouty subject's only drink—his wandering eye chanced to catch a pair of foils and masks which hung upon a wall amongst ancient and modern weapons and curios. He smiled, then laughed outright.

"Those foils remind me, Dennison!" he said, touching Denis's arm as he passed near the chair.

Denis smiled back and nodded.

"What fools we were!" said Warner, with a comfortable shrug of the shoulder—the shrug with which a man surveys a

folly from the safe distance which Time creates. "You might have killed me, or I might have killed you!"

Denis nodded. Some of the other men looked at the speaker curiously; and Warner, with the communicativeness born of a good dinner and the Dennison port, went on:

"Dennison and I were actually idiots enough to fight a duel!" he said. Everybody stopped playing, and gathered round, cues in hand; and Warner, pleased with the interest he had excited, cleared his throat, and assumed the well-known air and tone of the *raconteur*.

"Yes—fact! It was all about—what the deuce *was* it about, Dennison? I forget! I'm afraid that I had had too much of the wine-cup that day. I was trapesing about with a man named—named Foyle or Boyle—I forget his name too—and we came to loggerheads with Mr. Dennison here, and nothing would do but we must fight!" He laughed, sipped his ascetic drink—soap-suds and water, he called it—and looked round with a smile.

"We decided to fight with swords—I'm sure I don't know where we got 'em from—the other man, Foyle or Boyle, managed it; and I was so—so, well, off my head with the claret, that I tried to do Dennison an injury."

The auditors looked at each other with a surprise almost amounting to incredulity.

"There is a certain lunge which I picked up in Spain, and which I flattered myself was not to be parried this side of the Pyrenees. I tried it on our friend Dennison, and found my match. He slipped under my lunge, and spitted me—actually spitted me! I was in bed here—oh, a deuce of a time, wasn't it?"

Denis nodded again. The others exchanged glances. Near to her husband's elbow stood Nora, with her eyes downcast, a pretty little blush coming and going on her face. Warner rose from the chair with the slowness of the invalid, and reached the foils.

"I wonder whether I've forgotten that lunge!" he said. "Do you mind trying, Dennison?"

Denis took the foil Warner extended to him, and the rest made a circle of keenly-interested spectators.

The two men removed their coats, fell into position, and commenced. Warner's hand had not forgotten its cunning, and Denis felt a little curious as to the result of the famous movement. It came suddenly, swiftly, and, amidst a buzz of excitement, Warner's point touched Denis on the breast.

Warner stared with surprise.

"George! that's strange!" he said. "You let me in that time! It's lucky you didn't do so when we were fighting that night, or—well, you would have been a dead 'un!"

Denis looked down for a moment. Then he signed to Nora. She stood still for a moment, then she came forward—for, with her, obedience followed love.

"You try," he said, quietly.

Warner stared.

"Can Lady Dennison fence?"

"A little," said Denis.

"And you will really try it with me, Lady Dennison?" said Warner, delightedly. "It is a great honour!"

"My husband wishes me to do so," said Nora, modestly.

"At least put the mask on!" said Warner. But Nora shook her head, and fell with infinite grace into the first position.

Warner followed suit, and the duel commenced. The spectators held their breath, and pressed as closely as they dared, and a kind of gasp escaped their parted lips as Warner suddenly and swiftly made his lunge.

Then, to the amazement of all, his sword was seen to fly from his hand, and Nora's point was touching his breast.

A storm of delighted applause arose, and Warner stood staring with a benumbing astonishment for a moment; then he went up to her and looked at her steadily.

"By Heaven!" he exclaimed. "It was *you* I fought that night! It was—it was! I remember the parry—the thrust! It was you! And"—his face grew crimson—"you—you are Nora Neil!"

There was a dead silence, as the poor man stood abashed and humiliated; then Nora extended her hand, and smiled upon him.

"Yes, Major, it was Nora Neil who fought that night; but it is *Nora Dennison* who fights you now, and who, having fought, trusts that her old foe will forget and forgive, and prove a friend!"

As Denis began to tell the story—shielding Warner all he could—Warner bent over her hand and raised it to his lips; and, being no longer a fool, said, with manly frankness:

"Lady Nora, to be vanquished by you must be every man's fate, to be your friend his greatest pride and happiness!"

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